

Saturation Warfare in Iran's Military Strategy: Evolution from Deterrence to Offensive Asymmetry

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Received: 25-01-2026

Revised: 08-02-2026

Accepted: 23-02-2026

Published: 10-03-2026

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the technological transformation in the dynamics of modern warfare. The continuous adversary and belligerence with high-tech military powers have compelled resource-constrained countries to adopt strategies designed to offset that imbalance. It can be selecting a strategy that aligns with the situation, terrain, intelligence, and timing, for instance; it can be guerrilla warfare, prolonging the conflict, exploiting the enemy's vulnerabilities, or maybe adopting an offensive tactic of saturation warfare. It is a military tactic aimed at overwhelming the enemy's defensive capabilities by swarming them with a high volume of low-cost yet effective threats. It compels enemies to expend expensive defensive resources and ammo against the inexpensive yet immense airborne attacks. Over the past four decades, Iran has embarked on an ambitious military modernization program and developing a formidable force. It has revolutionized the domain of modern warfare by adopting the strategy of Saturation Warfare and emerged as a major power in West Asia. The adoption of this strategy as a military doctrine is a remarkable evolution from a static deterrent to an offensive asymmetric capability. However, due to strict sanctions and the absence of advanced conventional capabilities. Iran has laid the foundations of its military modernization on an inexpensive yet advanced and indigenous weapon industry system that enjoys strategic autonomy. Iran started developing advanced missile arsenals to increase its retaliatory options and achieve deterrence in the battlefield. After 2000, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) established a more robust and formidable deterrence framework, bolstered by a strong arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles and low-cost Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). These high-tech projectiles were developed with pinpoint accuracy, hypersonic speed, and in huge numbers to dodge and confuse highly fortified, well-protected targets like Israel. This transformation has turned Iran's posture from deterrence to compellence, a concept of coercive strategy as expounded by Thomas Schelling. The deterrence is aimed at preventing an adversary or military confrontation, whereas the compellence aims to change the behaviour of the aggressor, which has been observed in the Iran-Israel conflict in 2025 and the US-Israel war against Iran. In both situations, the US and Israel are observed to be more eager to end the war after exhaustion of interceptors.

Keywords: Choke-points, Asymmetry, Deterrence, Swarm & UAVs

INTRODUCTION

Saturation warfare is a military tactic in which an attacker overwhelms the enemy by launching a large volume of attacks. The rapid succession is aimed at exceeding the enemy's capability to respond and defend itself. It results in the penetration of highly defended military targets with precision and punitive impact. The key concept or objective of saturation warfare is based on cost asymmetry because it changes the balance between low-cost attacks and expensive defensive interceptions. The prolonged pressure caused by aggressive and punitive strikes exhausts the enemy to defend itself. Barrages of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and swarm attacks of drones on the adversaries ultimately, at one stage, result in

exhaustion of interceptors. A huge wave of such attacks confuses and complicates the defensive calculations and, at one point, results in successful penetrations.

On February 13-15, 1945, in Operation Thunderclap during the final days of World War II, the Allied Forces carried out saturation bombing raids on Dresden, Germany, killing roughly 25,000 people (Conroy, 2014). Although the strategic bombing raids aimed to degrade the enemy's military capabilities, they remained contentious due to the predominant civilian casualties. This saturation bombing campaign overwhelmed Germany's air defences. It has psychologically demoralized the enemy population, successfully penetrated highly defended areas, and disrupted their economic stability. In 1968, a Secret U.S. base on a mountain top in Lao, Vietnam, was overrun by elite Vietnamese Commandos. The Lima Site 85 shows an example of how a small, high-tech U.S. installation was overwhelmed by a saturation attack from multi-directional infiltration (Roblin, 2018). It was a classified U.S. Air Force and CIA radar site, which was used for the execution of mass bombing campaigns in northern Vietnam.

Iran has adopted this strategy of saturation attack during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). One year after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Iraq under President Saddam Hussein, invaded Iran and annexed the Shatt al-Arab waterway (Hofer, Corten, & Ruys, 2018). The war was sponsored by the Gulf States and backed by Western allies. During this war, Iran has suffered huge conventional and chemical missile attacks. . Iraq has deployed 23 Divisions and nine brigades consisting of 500,000 soldiers to fight this war On July 13, 1982, after two days of heavy artillery exchanges, the radio frequencies broadcast the code *Ya Saheb az Zaman! Ya Saheb az Zaman!* (Thou absent Imam!) Over 100,000 Revolutionary Guards and Basij volunteers charged towards Iraqi lines to capture strategic positions and capture Basra (Farrokh, 2011). . A heavy human wave attack by the Basij on the Iraqi positions has enabled them to gain strategic objectives despite the heavy casualties they managed to drag the war into Iraq and capturing key positions.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC, also known as Pasdaran or Sepah) is a foremost force in executing the country's asymmetrical defence policies across the region. It has refined the asymmetrical strategy gained from its experiences of the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). Hence, by the early 2000s, Iran had evolved this strategy from deterrence to more offensive asymmetry. Iran's saturation war strategy is an adaptive response to the highly protected and well-defended architecture of Israel and US bases in the region. The strategy has evolved from a deterrence-based doctrine to a more offensive tactic. It exploits the operational vulnerabilities of the enemy's system. The development of advanced drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles has enabled Iran to attain deterrence by compellence. Iran is producing a large number of ballistic missiles that are indigenously manufactured with pinpoint accuracy, hypersonic speed, and medium to long-range to target any adversary across the Middle East with precision and pace. The second important point that has changed the deterrence posture of Iran in the region is due to its proxies. They include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Yemen, Hamas in Palestine, and Hashad ul Shabi in Iraq (Falk, 2022). They are Iran's loyal paramilitary umbrella groups in the region and a component of Iran's Axis of Resistance. Proxy groups, when activated at the time of need engage enemies in a decisive battle also create strategic pressure. They always turn this war imposed on Iran into a multi-front war and engage enemies at various fronts.

The United States has encircled Iran with its military bases across the region. It maintains a considerable military presence in the Middle East, with forces in more than a dozen countries and on ships throughout the region's waters (Ferragamo, Roy, Masters, & Merrow, 2025). The U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet Headquarters is located in Bahrain, 24-hectare Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Camp Airfjan in Kuwait, Al-Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Ain Al Asad Air Base in Iraq, Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, and Muwaffaq al Salti Air Base in Jordan (Reuters, 2026). These bases have been involved in carrying out bombing campaigns inside Iran during the ongoing war. Furthermore, the bases

are equipped with advanced radar systems and medium to long-range air defence systems, providing Israel with an additional layer of air defence. Although Israel itself is a highly defended country with THAAD, Iron Dome, Arrow-II, and David's Sling air defence systems.

However, in the recent escalation after the U.S.-Israel all-out war, Iran has retaliated with a saturation warfare strategy and it has attacked simultaneously on multitudinous targets inside Israel and almost all the US bases in the Gulf Countries and the USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier. These saturation strikes continued to the US strategic bases and installations in the region for almost 40 days, ultimately changing the strategic discourse in Iran's interest. Iran managed to send waves of missiles and drones to the Israeli and US bases in the region due to their innovation and adaptability, which has offset the conventional difference between the two.

The US-Israel war against Iran has changed the entire geostrategic landscape of the region. Previously, the geopolitical wisdom has been that the world order was moving toward three centers of power: the United States, China, and Russia, based on military capabilities and economic strength. However, after this war, a fourth center of global power has emerged, i.e., Iran, and its power derives from controlling the most important energy choke points, the Strait of Hormuz (Pape, 2026).

Before delving into the concept of saturation war strategy, it is essential to elucidate the distinctions between the effectiveness of deterrence and offensive asymmetry.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is based on qualitative investigation, and discourse analysis research methodology is employed to understand, explain, and analyze the change in security strategy of the Middle East. The exploratory research is primarily based on secondary resources, including books, research articles, news articles, and published reports focusing on the US-Israel war against Iran. Iran's expansion of a saturation war strategy and overwhelming retaliation against Israel and US bases in the Middle East. The strategy has changed the security paradigm in West Asia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

LTC Richard A. Conroy (2014), in the book titled Operation Thunderclap: The Bombing of Dresden explained how precision bombing was carried out during World War II. The country, with air superiority, firepower, and the capability to bomb, had a strategic edge. The strategy changed in the late 1944-45 from limited strategic bombing to devastating saturation attack in which Allied forces had overwhelmed the Nazis in their heavy bombing campaigns of Dresden and Berlin. The German air defence systems were incapable of intercepting the outnumbered British bombers that dropped heavy payloads over vast urban areas.

The authors Gawdat Bahgat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami (2017), in their famous article titled Iran's Defence Strategy: The Navy, Ballistic Missiles and Cyberspace, argue that Iran's defence strategy is based on asymmetric warfare (Ehteshami & Bahgat, 2017). It includes modernization of asymmetric tactics in naval doctrine, ballistic missiles, and cyber warfare. The primary objective of these tactics is the strategic use of the unique geographical position and ability to deter conventionally strong military powers like the United States and Israel. Small speed boats equipped with cruise missiles overwhelm the big naval fleets and aircraft carriers, and the pinpoint accuracy of long-range ballistic missiles creates deterrence. Additionally, cyber capabilities can sabotage and threaten enemies' military infrastructure and serve as an offensive psychological weapon.

Uzi Rubin (2006), in a book titled “The Global Range of Iran’s Ballistic Missile Program”, argues that Iran has developed a ballistic missile program because, since the Gulf War, the United States has replaced Iraq as a preeminent threat (Rubin, 2006). The author assumes that Iran knows that the confrontation between the United States and its allies will happen for sure. The war of attrition should cost such a high price that the United States will choose not to fight in the first place.

Michael Connell (2013), in his article titled *Gulf III: Iran’s Power in the Sea Lanes*, argues regarding the interaction between the U.S. and the Iranian navies in the Persian Gulf (Connell, 2013). The author argues that Iran has two independent navies, one is called the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN), and the second is called the naval wing of the Revolutionary Guards (IRGCN). Both have separate yet somewhat overlapping areas of responsibility. Additionally, they have their different mode of training, equipment, and fighting tactics. The Revolutionary Guard Navy has a huge number of small vessels to overwhelm the enemy and is trained in asymmetric tactics at sea.

Grzegorz Kolata (2019), in his research article titled “Evolution of the aerial defence of air bases, Concepts and lessons learned, suggests that with the modernization of weapons, aircraft, missiles, and drones, the nature of attacks on the air bases has become more dangerous, precise, and punitive (Kolata, 2019). The air bases have always been repeatedly attacked from World War I to the modern wars, including the Vietnam War, the Arab-Israel Wars, the Gulf War (1991), and the Hezbollah-Israel War (2006). Early warning systems (like radars) are essential. The radars are used for detection and surveillance, and anti-air weapons for interception and defence. The primary objective of this air defence is to safeguard high-value and high-tech fighter jets and other assets.

Bozorgmehr Sharafedin (2025), in their new article titled “Iran vows ‘roaring missiles’ if threatened, defies new sanctions, reports that Iran’s Revolutionary Guards commanders said that Iran would use its missiles if its security is under threat, as the US intends to implement sanctions on its missile programs (Sharafedin, 2025). The article analyzes the impact of Iran’s ballistic missile test in the region and the US administration's threats to impose economic sanctions on its program.

Gawdat Bahgat (2019), in a news article titled “Iran’s Ballistic-Missile and Space Program: An Assessment”, has referred to three forces that have explained the significance of the ballistic missiles (Bahgat, 2019). The unwavering determination stems from the deterrence capability of ballistic missiles and their cost-effectiveness. First, Iran has procured from foreign countries and also indigenously started the development of a ballistic missile program during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). Secondly, due to the reason that crippling sanctions on Iran’s Air Force have compelled Iran to develop missile technology as an alternative for deterrence. Thirdly, Iran has used its space program more than just a civilian initiative. It has used Space Launch Vehicles (SLVs) not only for the advancement of its space program but also for the development of long-range ballistic missiles.

Mariel Ferragamo, Diana Roy, Will Merrow, and Jonathan (2025), in their article titled U.S. Forces in the Middle East: Mapping the Military Presence, " argue that the United States has expanded its military presence in the Gulf countries after 2024 as part of its efforts to build pressure on Iran by encirclement (Ferragamo, Roy, Masters, & Merrow, 2025). This strategy is adopted to protect Israel from Iran and its proxies in the region, i.e., Hamas (Gaza Strip), Hezbollah (Lebanon), and the Houthis (Yemen). Moreover, the United States also wanted to attack Iran’s nuclear facility. The article emphasizes the operational role of US bases in the Gulf region with an offensive force structure for deterrence missions. Simultaneously, it also underscores many operational risks and vulnerabilities for them.

Robert A. Pape (2026), in a famous news article titled “The War is Turning Iran into a Major World Power,” has argued that the conventional geopolitical wisdom has been that the world order was moving

towards three centers of power: the United States, China, and Russia due to the economic and military capabilities. However, the recent US and Israel-led war against Iran has led to the emergence of a new major power. This power does not derive from military or economic capability; rather, it is based on controlling the most important energy chokepoint, the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb (Pape, 2026). The author advocates that sometimes the geostrategic location outweighs the traditional sources of power, which could be measure tangibles means, i.e., economic capabilities and military power.

Priyanka Shankar (2026), in her article titled “What is Iran’s military strategy? How has it changed since the June 2025 war?” has analyzed the scale and strategy of Iran’s response to the US-Israel war on Iran. On the very first day, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, his family, and key military commanders were assassinated. The key strategic positions were hit with punitive strikes and heavy bombardment (Shankar, What is Iran’s military strategy? How has it changed since June 2025 war?, 2026). However, Iran managed to retaliate decisively and avenge the killing of its leadership with firmness and launched the heaviest offensive operations against the adversaries across the region. This was the first time in the history of the Islamic revolution that such decisive strike missions were carried out, and it emerged as a great power.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research is theoretically based on the theory of the coercive strategy expounded by Thomas Schelling. This theory is a cornerstone of modern strategic and security studies. The theory explains how an actor can influence or regulate the behaviour of another by threat, menace, and incentives. The state seeks to alter opponents' decisions and actions instead of completely defeating the enemy militarily. It can be possible by threats, pressure, and by increasing the costs of continuing the war. According to Schelling’s logic, the country uses punitive military force, blockade of energy corridors, escalation signaling, and proxy armies, and increases the compulsion of enemies to change their military strategy and behaviour. Iran does not always aim for much destruction, but sometimes it demonstrates that its projectiles can penetrate unbreachable and impervious air defence systems and can punitively inflict damage to their targets. Therefore, this action is not confined only to deterrence (preventing action), but it also ensures compellence (forcing action).

Israel and Gulf Air Defence Architecture

The recent Israel-US-imposed war on Iran and Iran’s decisive retaliation have changed the entire strategic landscape of this region. The position of the Gulf region has been changed from a peripheral theatre to a central arena of warfare between the belligerents. The GCC countries hosting US military bases have faced heavy missile and drone spillover from day one. The repercussions are no longer confined to direct combatants; they are reshaping the broader architecture of regional security (Alkuwari, 2026). The US bases in the GCC states are multipurpose strategic hubs and one of the key reasons for their presence, besides the security of energy routes, is the security of Israel from any adversary in the region. In this regard, Israel and the United States have deployed a high-tech air defense system in the Gulf countries with the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain. As of today, Israel’s layered air defense system architecture is as follows (Bartels, 2017). The Iron Dome covers 4-70 km, David’s Sling covers 40-300 km, Arrow 2 has a range of 500 km, and Arrow 3 has an operational range of 2400 km.

Israel’s Layered Defence

Israel, due to its expansionist policies, has always been engaged in war with its immediate neighbours, especially with Palestine and Lebanon. Israel’s military operations in these countries include sabotage, air raids, and targeted assassinations of political and military figures associated with resistance movements.

The primary objective of Israel's military operations is to ensure security and countermeasures for attacks in response to Israel's expansion of territorial control in the occupied territories, aimed at the establishment of residential settlements. These developments result in dissent from the affected Palestinian and Lebanese population and justified resistance by the armed groups. Consequently, Israel faces rocket and Guerrilla attacks by Hamas and Hezbollah and they have suffered more than 4000 Katyusha rocket attacks in one month during the Second Lebanon War, 2006, and the ongoing rocket fire from the Gaza Strip over the past decade (Shapir, 2013). Israel has developed a multi-layered defence system to intercept diverse aerial threats of various types and different altitudes. A high-tech and expensive multi-tiered air defence architecture has been developed over the past decades, and ensures interception of short-range, medium-range, and long-range projectiles with accurate detection by the radars and precise interceptions. Israel's hostility with its Arab neighbours is due to its expansionist policies, which have resulted in persistent border skirmishes, especially from the Gaza Strip and southern Lebanon. Hence, Israel has developed a defence doctrine based on four pillars: deterrence, early warning, active defence, and a quick and decisive response on the battlefield (Sonmez & Batu, 2021).

Iron Dome – Short Range Air Defence

Iron Dome is Israel's short-range air defence system, which is adjusted to intercept and neutralize short-range missiles, artillery shells, and drones up to a range of 70 kms. The Iron Dome is an advanced air defence system equipped with a sophisticated radar capable of detecting enemy projectiles and effectively launching missiles to neutralize them. Israel has deployed this system in the urban areas and densely populated cities, which can easily intercept missile barrages and drone attacks. It's an all-weather air defence system developed by Rafael Advanced Defense Systems and Israel Aerospace Industries (Hughes, 2021). The cost is \$50 million per battery and \$100,000-150,000 per interception; moreover, Israel has currently deployed 10 batteries, and planned deployment is 15 batteries (Vick, 2013). It moves at the speed of Mach 2.2, and there are three/four launchers, usually each carrying 20 interceptors. It operates on a proximity fuze system, which detonates when it gets near its target object. It was calculated (and borne out in combat) that a fuze which would explode a projectile near a plane would increase lethality by a factor of five or ten (Hinman, 1957).

The recent US-Israel war on Iran has unleashed Iran's relentless retaliatory strikes on the US bases in the Gulf countries. The UAE has received the persistent strikes on the key US bases and installations, and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has ordered its military for deployment of an Iron Dome battery with military personnel to operate it (Shalev, 2026). This deployment has made the UAE the first country in the Arab world where Israel has stationed its forces and deployed weapons for security purposes.

David's Sling – Medium Range Air Defence

David's Sling is a second and medium-range air defence and interceptor system. It bridges long-range air defence systems and Iron Dome, and is responsible for neutralizing heavy airborne objects, including ballistic and cruise missiles. David's Sling is designed and developed by Rafael Advanced Defence Systems and Raytheon Missiles & Defense, and the unit cost is \$1 million (Safronov, 2025). The per-unit cost is \$120-200 million, and initially an inventory of 6-10 batteries has been planned to be procured. The maximum speed of this super maneuverable asymmetric kill vehicle is Mach 4 – Mach 5.5 with an Active Electronic Scanned Array (AESA) and Imaging Infrared (IIR) capabilities.

Arrow – Long Range Air Defence

The Arrow system is Israel's long-range ballistic missile defence, which is responsible for intercepting long-range projectiles at high altitude with precision and speed. This is a top-tier layer that includes two

variants, Arrow-2 and Arrow-3, providing strategic protection against heavy Ballistic Missiles and Cruise Missiles at long distances. The Arrow 2 and 3 are manufactured by Israel Aerospace Industries and Boeing Defense, Space, and Security (Bob, 2026). Arrow-2 uses a fragmentation warhead that detonates within 50 meters of the target and is capable of terminal-phase interceptions at a range of 90 km and a height of 50 km. Arrow-3 is a hit-to-kill interceptor and can carry out exo-atmospheric interceptions at a range of 2,400 km (Policy Forum, 2025). It comprises a mass of 1,300 kg (2900 lb), and its length is approximately 6.8m (22ft), with a maximum speed of Arrow-2 and Arrow-3 being Mach 9 and Mach 12, respectively.

Gulf Countries' Defence Systems

The United States maintains a strategic presence in the Gulf countries to protect its economic, energy, and strategic interests in the region. The two most strategic energy corridors, the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb, pass through this region. The 80% of global oil consumption passes through these straits, with more than 20 million barrels per day only from the Strait of Hormuz, which earns its description as “the world’s most important oil transit chokepoint” (Zain, 2025).

The United States has the 5th Fleet Headquarters in Bahrain, along with Sheikh Isa Air Base and Muharrag Air Base (Navy), Al Asad Air Base in Iraq, Muwaffaq Salti Air Base (Azraq) in Jordan, Ali Al Salem Air Base, Camp Buehring, Camp Patriot, and Camp Airfjan (serves as US HQ), in Kuwait (Wallin, 2018). The Al Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi, Port of Jebel Ali, and Fujairah Naval Base, UAE, Prince Sultan Air Base, 60 km south of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and RAFO Masirah and Al-Musannah Air Base, Oman (Reuters, 2026). Incirlik airbase, in southern Turkey, is the strategically most important US military facility in the region (Malsin & Holliday, 2026). This base is hosting thirty-two US F-16 fighters, 18 older F-4 Phantoms, ICBMs, cruise missiles, and some important bombers, and it ranked fourth in the number of nuclear weapons deployed overseas (Karasapan, 1989).

These bases serve as a deterrent against a regional adversary, Iran, by enabling air defence, surveillance, and intelligence operations.

Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD)

The Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) system is Lockheed Martin’s highly advanced US air defence system designed to intercept short, medium, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. The system is based on hit-to-kill technology and destroys incoming projectiles through a direct impact. Each THAAD battery costs \$1 billion and \$12.6 million per missile; its mass is 2,000 lb (900 kg), and its length is around 20 ft 3 in (6.17m) (Jennings, 2017). The THAAD air defence batteries are deployed in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the Kurecik radar Station, Malatya Province, Turkey, in a counter-ballistic missile threat from Iran to Israel and regional US bases (Mezzofiore, 2026).

MIM-104 Patriot

The MIM-104 Patriot, or simply the Patriot air defence system, is a widely used surface-to-air missile (SAM) used by the US Army to intercept any airborne target, including aircraft, ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, or drones. It can be used for short-, medium-, intermediate-, and long-range projectiles with pinpoint accuracy. It was manufactured by Raytheon Technologies in 1981 and since then it is in service since the first Gulf War (1991), in Afghanistan (2001), and recently it was used in the 2026 Iran War. A single Patriot battery without missiles costs about \$400 million, and a single missile costs \$10 million, with a maximum speed of 5,630 km/h and a 160 km (99 miles) operational range (Cancian & Karako,

2022). The United States has exported over 250 launchers to 18 countries, and over 10,000 missiles have been manufactured (Judson, 2024).

This air defence system is currently deployed in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman (Chughtai & Ali, 2025). Strategically, the Patriot provides a middle-layer protection from THAAD and indirectly provides an additional layer of defence from any attack from Iran or its allies during the war. This was observed during the recent Iran-Israel war of 2026, in which the United States and GCC countries gave an additional shield to Israel from Iran's hypersonic ballistic missiles.

Other Short and Medium-Range Air Systems

Besides THAAD and Patriot, several other air defence systems are deployed in the region to intercept Iranian ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones, thereby indirectly protecting and defending Israel and US bases in the region. They include Aegis Ballistic Defence (Sea-based), AN/TPY-2 Radar (Early Warning System), which is deployed at Al Udeid Air base, Pantsir-S1 and M-SAM (Cheongung-II), South Korean medium range system in the UAE, Shahine / Crotale Systems, French air defence system in Saudi Arabia, and Barak-8, Israeli air defence system to intercept airborne projectiles in the region.

Iran's Offensive Strike Architecture and Saturation Capabilities

Iran's offensive strike architecture is a thoughtful and deliberate shift from a conventional force projection and military strategy to an asymmetric war doctrine. It is based on a combination of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Instead of pursuing an expensive high-tech technological parity with its adversaries, like Israel or the United States. Iran has given paramount significance to cost, precision, scalability, and operational resilience, enabling it to retaliate with punitive strikes in an intense combat scenario. An architecture not designed to retaliate defensively, but rather designed to cause cumulative disruption at mass scale by simultaneously opening multiple theatres of engagement with saturated strikes and exhaust the most expensive layered air defence systems.

Iran has changed the strategic discourse of future wars by employing heterogeneous asymmetric trajectories in an inexpensive but destructive, dispersive, and punitive way. Islamic Republic doctrine increasingly emphasizes combined waves of drones and missiles designed to saturate defensive systems, launching multiple threat types simultaneously to overwhelm interception capacity, exploit gaps in layered defenses, and impose an unfavourable cost exchange on defenders (Davidovits, Drones, AI, cyber show why warfare has entered a dangerous new era - opinion, 2026). Iran's response was heavily dependent on its missile and drone arsenal, including ballistic and cruise missile families such as *Shahab*, *Khorramshahr*, *Sijil*, *Khaibar Shikan* ballistic missiles, and *Shahed-136* and *Mohajir-6* drones for saturation attacks.

Doctrinal Foundations of Asymmetric Strike Capabilities

Firstly, Iran's doctrinal adaptations of structural asymmetric capabilities are due to the imposition of stringent sanctions and prolonged isolation. It has halted the upgradation of its military and airpower capabilities. The export of military equipment and procurement of advanced fighter jets and weapon systems are barred. **Secondly**, the adversaries with the United States and Israel coincided with the crippling sanctions and restrictions on acquisition of defence systems has led Iran to expand its reliance on indigenously modernized its military production. **Thirdly**, Iran has learnt from the past conflicts like Sacred Defence (1980-88), the first Gulf War (1991), and the Iraq War (2003) regarding the vulnerability to airpower and the rapid collapse of conventional armies. The traditional conventional military paradigms and even the strongest armies collapsed within weeks because the centralized and conventional

militaries are easily destroyed. Iran has opted for shifting towards decentralized and survivable strike systems. After the martyrdom of Imam Ali Khamenei, the IRGC launched the heaviest offensive operations in the history of the armed forces of the Islamic Republic against occupied lands [a reference to Israel] and the bases of American terrorists (Shankar, What is Iran's military strategy? How has it changed since June 2025 war?, 2026).

Fourthly, Iran has secretly transformed its traditional military doctrine and adopted a decentralized "Mosaic Defence" Doctrine. A concept built on one core assumption: that in any war with the United States or Israel, Iran may lose senior commanders, key facilities, communications networks, and even centralized control, but must still be able to keep fighting (Ibrahim, 2026). Under this doctrine, even after the assassination of the top commanders, including the Supreme Leader or top military commanders, the IRGC in all the units (provinces) and available stockpiles of missiles and drones will retaliate offensively with decisive force. They will select and hit the US and Israel's strategic targets with punitive strikes without disruption. **Fifthly**, the primary target of this strategy will be the cost-imposition and attrition strategy for the enemies, so that they cannot sustain for a long period. It will be a battle of nerves because the United States has to intercept Iran's \$20 thousand Shaheed drone with at least two Patriot interceptors, which cost at least \$4.2 million each (Cancian & Karako, 2022). Hence, Iran has fired thousands of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones on Israeli and US bases and aircraft carriers.

Ballistic Missiles as a Backbone of Saturation Attacks

Ballistic missiles are not just strike weapons; in fact, they are the main pillar of Iran's saturation war strategy. They provide range, survivability, volume, and endurance for war, from punitive strikes to overwhelming the enemy defences. It provides a cost-effective attack and can turn expensive air defences ineffective. Even after 40 days of war, the United States intelligence reports that Iran still has thousands of ballistic missiles in its arsenal that it could use by retrieving launchers from underground storage areas (Gordon, 2026). Iran's ballistic missile program is based on a layered range of classes, including Short-Range Ballistic Missiles (SRBMs) like Fateh-110 and Zolfaghar for tactical precision, and Medium-Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) like Shahab-3 and Sijjil, and Emad for credible strategic deterrence. Furthermore, Iran has further expanded and shifted its program from liquid-fueled to solid-fueled missile systems, which increased the endurance, precision, and mobility. Iran also has a huge stockpile of hypersonic ballistic missiles with pinpoint accuracy, which are the most deterrent force and have proved a nightmare for the adversaries in the recent war (Motamedi, 2023). Due to consistent US-Israel air raids, it is very difficult for Iran to continue and keep retaliating with ballistic missiles. Therefore, Iran has not only developed and scattered its missile launchers to deep underground bases, but has also shifted their missiles from liquid-fuel to solid fuel, which reduces launch preparations and ensures speed and precision.

Cruise Missiles and the Challenge of Low-Altitude Penetration

Cruise missiles are a major element of modern military strategy due to their precision, range, and flexibility in modern warfare. They enable decisive saturation through low-altitude flight, bypassing early detection and interception. While cruise missiles have a less efficient trajectory than ballistic missiles, they are much more maneuverable, making their trajectories much less predictable (Fontana & Lauro, 2022). The cruise missiles are unlike the ballistic missiles, which follow a predictable high-trajectory arc that can be traced in the early warning radars and can be intercepted accordingly. However, the cruise missile's close-to-the-earth flight allows it to follow terrain contours and is free from interception.

If we see this from a radar evasion perspective, the cruise missiles exploit the structural blind spots of the radar coverage, especially in complex geographical terrains. Additionally, in a saturation attack

environment, the attack with numerous projectiles at once, like ballistic missiles, drones, and cruise missiles with low altitude flights, causes more difficulties in interception, and the chances of hitting the target with force become easier.

From an operational perspective, this creates a challenge for air defence systems to intercept. In a saturation attack environment, the cruise missiles do not serve as a precision strike weapon; rather, they serve as a tactic that confuses the air defences due to their speed, flight altitude, and maneuverability in an already overwhelmed environment. It creates a detection stress on the enemies. This is the reason the United States has shown its inability to intercept all the Iranian missiles. “The Iranians do have the ability to make a lot of Shahed drones, ballistic missiles, medium range, short range, and they’ve got a huge stockpile, and it’s a match problem for the United States, and how can we resupply air defense munitions?” Kelly said (Bertrand, Atwood, Ferris, & Blackburn, 2026).

Drone Swarms (Unmanned Aerial Systems) and the Economics of Attrition

The use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) has significantly changed the strategic discourse on modern battlefields. A swarm attack is a kind of attack in which a large number of drones are used for a saturation strike, coordinated to overwhelm the enemy's detection, tracking, and interception capabilities. The system is based on volume over sophistication, and even basic quadcopters and loitering munitions become very lethal when used at scale. The consistently maneuvering and remotely controlled swarm attacks of drones become more lethal when coordinated with layers of polytomous ballistic missiles and cruise missiles approaching from different directions and altitudes. These inexpensive drone swarms are deployed as a decoy, triggering radars and interceptors, and the actual hypersonic ballistic missiles slip through and penetrate for deep punitive strikes. Gulf States and U.S. forces have largely relied on costly interceptor missiles to shoot them, underscoring a broader shift in air combat in which cheaper systems developed in volume can steadily erode the stock of advanced air defense missiles (Kelly & Shiraki, 2026). These drones cost a few hundred to a maximum range of a few thousand dollars, whereas high-tech interceptors like Patriot and Arrow-3 cost a million dollars per shot. Even the mid-tier missiles cost heavily to destroy those drones and ballistic missiles.

The interceptors' missiles are limited, require time for reloading, and the stocks can be depleted instantly. The defender is constrained to a limited number of threats, allowing many to pass through, thereby creating an opportunity for penetration and striking the strategic targets. This strategy is significantly an option to a technologically viable adversary which not provide an outright victory instantly; however, it provides a strategic gain over time.

Integrated Strike Architecture: Enabling Multi-Axis Saturation

Iran’s saturation strikes are not confined to the usage of one particular weapon system to strike its adversaries; they are framed in an integrated strike architecture. This combines high volume of drones, cruise missiles for stealth and persistence, and ballistic missiles for speed and impact. These layers are used in sequence, and each component plays a unique but harmonizing role. The first wave of drone attacks is cheap, huge in numbers, but sluggish, with a primary objective to trap and decoy the radars and expensive air defenses. This onslaught is followed by a second wave of cruise missiles, the penetrators with low flight, harder to detect, and aimed at creating a saturation space. The third wave is a shock layer based on ballistic missiles, fast, high-altitude, destructive, and aimed at high-value targets for impact. The individual attack may not be destructive, but together they create a multi-vector problem for the enemy. Tehran’s development of high-tech missile, drone capabilities and regional proxy networks is often justified by Iranian policymakers as a defensive strategy designed to deter external threats (Ansary & Biswas, 2026)..

Outcomes of Iran's Saturation Warfare Strategy

In recent Iran's engagements with the US and Israel, it has been vividly observed that Iran has shifted its doctrine from deterrence-centric to overtly offensive asymmetry. Previously, Iran has mostly relied on layered deterrence by combining its proxies in the region, its high-tech drone and missile capabilities, and by utilizing its strategic depth. Iran's saturation strategy has yielded a strategic opportunity with numerous outcomes. The forward bases of strong armies give them a strategic edge on their adversaries at the time of war. They serve as an outpost for any confrontation without compromising their own land. The traditional war strategy assumes that such forward bases with strong military presence ensure deterrence; however, the recent conflict with Iran's decisive strike has changed the perception. Iran's retaliation proved that, beyond being merely an operational response, US military presence in the region no longer functions as a protective shield but rather as a "lightning rod" that draws conflict upon itself (Ercan, 2026). Iranian retaliation strikes were spread in a large geography not only on Israel but also on US bases in the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Jordan. The most strategic locations of the United States military presence include the Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, and Al Dhafra Air Base in Abu Dhabi.

Deterioration of Air Defense Effectiveness

The primary objective of Iran's saturation war strategy is to overwhelm the enemy's air defense systems. It is based on a strategy to exhaust the enemy's layered air defence interception capability. The most advanced and high-tech air defense systems, such as the United States' Patriot and Israel's Iron Dome, fail to intercept all projectiles due to simultaneous engagement with numerous multi-vector threats. Iran deploys mixed salvos combining UAVs, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles of subsonic and hypersonic categories at once on multiple bases and targets. This confuses the enemies' tracking and interception. It is about how very different technologies, expensive strategic platforms, and scalable autonomous systems now operate together as part of an integrated system of systems (Davidovits, Drones, AI, cyber show why warfare has entered a dangerous new era - opinion, 2026). This war is a paradigm shift and has changed the entire defence architecture, as high-tech and expensive weapon systems cannot guarantee achieving the objectives of the war.

Cost-Imposition on Adversaries

The primary advantage of saturation warfare is its cost-imposition on the enemy. Iran deploys very cheap, inexpensive Shahid drones to target the most strategic targets like US aircraft carriers and radar systems in the US bases. One Shahid-136 drone costs 20 thousand dollars, whereas a single shot of Iron Dome interceptor costs around \$100,000 to \$150,000, and at least two shots are required to hit a single drone or any projectile (Vick, 2013). Therefore, it costs an economically untenable proportion over time, specifically after Iran's more than ninety waves of strikes.

Iran's heavy retaliation has become structurally unfavourable in terms of cost exchange for the United States (Hilani, 2026). The United States has always depended on high-tech weaponry systems for sustenance in war and has achieved its military objectives in armed conflicts. However, this war has raised concerns and structural tensions in the Pentagon about whether the United States is running out of munitions at a very early stage of war. It has raised serious questions about the US military doctrine and the achievement of any decisive victory based on its apparent military superiority.

Strategic and Psychological Pressure

The very first week of Iran's retaliation strikes in response to the Operation Epic Fury has proved that drones have become a significant weapon of retaliation and war in modern military campaigns. They can be used as a strategic weapon to gain military objectives with accuracy and at a low cost. Their ability to generate sustained pressure at relatively low cost allows actors to impose economic, psychological, and operational strain on adversaries while preserving higher-end missile assets for select targets (Bondar, 2026). The pressure was not only built from the strikes with such drones and different types of missiles, but also due to the volume of their continuous production as well. Thus, the scope of saturation attacks was not confined to military and economic gains; it also caused a persistent psychological stress and anxiety in the enemy. The frequent alarms and alerts everyday especially at night, create strain on the civilian population and military personnel. The perception of vulnerability and an uncertain security environment compromised public confidence and created political pressure on the governments. This psychological impact is more destructive for the country than material damage. It affects the market, business, and foreign investment in the country.

Expansion of the Battlespace

Iran's saturation war strategy is aimed at expanding the battlefield space, thereby exploiting the enemy's vulnerabilities. Iran retaliated by targeting Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries with about 83 percent of its total missile and drone strikes during the war, with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) receiving the most attacks out of any country, including Israel (Ali, 2026). Iran has also established proxy networks in the regional countries, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Palestine, Houthis in Yemen, and Hashad ul Shaibi in Iraq. They engage Israel and the United States at the time of war, and Iran alone strikes at almost all the US bases in West Asia. The opening of multiple threats and fronts at once adversely affects the United States and Israel's ability to concentrate, and it dilutes their resources.

Enhancement of Asymmetric Deterrence and Compellence

Compellence is a geostrategic term coined by Thomas Schelling to describe the military pressure by a state against a stronger adversary. It compels the enemy to act in a particular way in response to overwhelming attack. In simple term it compel the enemy to do what I want otherwise the pain will either continue or worsen. This is what Iran has employed in its asymmetric deterrence strategy. In this scenario, victory is not always about knocking out the entire enemy infrastructure or ensure complete destruction. It is in fact about controlled pressure that help in winning geopolitical concessions. The United States and Israel have huge military spending, high-tech weaponry systems, and alliances with the GCC countries, so they can easily engage with the regional adversaries and always secure strategic gains. The US military presence in Al-Dhafra Air Base, Abu Dhabi, at other regional bases for coordination with the regional command and control system reflects the coordinated intelligence architecture designed to continue this war. It has formed a complex security ecosystem designed for the containment of Iran and its alliances in the region. Therefore, Iran has strengthened its deterrence posture by demonstrating its ability to punitively hit the enemy simultaneously at multiple fronts despite having conventional limitations.

Operational Sustainability through Low-Cost Systems

Aerial superiority has long been a preserved asset of wealthy nations, which enabled them to dominate the battlefields. The air arm of the advanced militaries supported the ground invasions and destroyed the key strategic assets behind enemy lines. It has historically been a critical and often decisive asset for quick strategic victories. However, in the recent war, it has been observed that even after deploying the most advanced stealth fighters and air defence systems remained unable to change the course of war. Iran is

under strict economic and military sanctions, compelling it to emphasize indigenously developed systems that are low-cost and sustainable for its long-term strategy. They have adhered to a saturation war strategy, which requires extended periods of continuity. Cheap attack drones are beginning to erode that advantage, giving smaller and less wealthy forces a greater ability to inflict damage (Arranz, et al., 2026). Therefore, the Shaheed-131 is an example of a low-cost, high-value asset that they have developed and employed for their longer sustenance in the war.

Stimulation of Countermeasures and Defense Innovation

The consistent saturation attacks on Israel and the US bases in the region have compelled them to adapt more innovative strategy to defend their positions in the region. Heavy investments in the integrated air defense system, electronic warfare, and missile interceptions are required owing to Iran's punitive strikes. Iran's strikes have destroyed the US radar and air defense systems and penetrated their layered defenses to hit hard. The exceeding costs of war and the exceeding depletion of interceptors compelled the US to change the course of its strategy by purchasing cheap intercepting drones. The Army purchased 13,000 interceptor drones for its Merops system within roughly eight days, which are \$15000 apiece (Epstein, 2026). The depletion of interception stockpiles is also one of the reasons that compelled the United States to opt for a ceasefire.

CONCLUSION

The examination of Iran's saturation war strategy in response to the US and Israel's imposed war suggests, that despite excessive use of force, offensive bombardment at military, civilian, and non-military targets. Iran has managed to demonstrate operational success due to its offensive asymmetric tactic and hybrid strategy. The primary objective of Iran's military tactics was to increase the cost of war for the aggressors and surprise the enemy by changing the operational pace of this conflict with offensive drone swarms and missile strikes.

Firstly, Iran launched huge swarms of drone attacks and missile barrages, thereby overwhelming the enemy's expensive defence interceptors. After a few days, Iran managed to create a vulnerability by degrading the multilayered air defence systems and penetrated with deep punitive strikes. Iran has developed its missile technology and UAVs over the past decades from a defensive strategy to offensive asymmetry. Secondly, it is also observed that even after several thousand decisive strikes, targeted killings of the top military commanders, including the Supreme Leader, Iran has managed to retaliate with overwhelming force. Consequently, targeted the key military and energy installations across the Middle East by relying on its indigenously built saturation attacks. Thirdly, Iran has managed to develop its multiple launch systems and continuously produce cheap but decisive drones a linchpin of its saturation strikes. This serves as a mean of economic attrition for the enemy. Fourthly, Iran has expanded the battle space to almost all the US military bases and its aircraft carrier in the Middle East, which has been withdrawn from the frontline at the outset of the war. The dispersion and redundancy reflect the key strength of saturation. Although Iran's saturation war strategy does not yield a decisive victory in the true conventional sense by knocking out the adversary, it generates endurance and coercive leverage for Iran by outweighing precision and technology over cost and persistence.

Thus, Iran, through its military strategy, has proved that in conventional conflicts, success does not merely depend on technological superiority or dominance, but rather on overwhelming the enemy even with very cheap but strategic use of those weapons.

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