



SVARIX INTELLIGENCE OS

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT • GEOPOLITICS • 25 March 2026

Iran's Multi-Wave Missile Tactics Redefine Modern Warfare and Expose Air Defense Gaps

85/100 HIGH

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Executive Summary

Iran's sustained multi-wave missile and drone operations have exposed critical vulnerabilities in even the most advanced air defense architectures, revealing an urgent need for low-cost, scalable countermeasures and a paradigm shift in strategic defense planning. This approach, centered on 'deterrence by endurance' and economic attrition, threatens to fragment traditional alliance structures and compress escalation ladders with the implicit threat of nuclear-capable platforms. Immediate acceleration of affordable interceptor development and regional integration is essential to restore credible deterrence and counter emerging hypersonic threats.

Situation Assessment

Iran's evolving missile and drone campaign across the Middle East has marked a defining inflection in contemporary conflict, triggered by a deliberate escalation in both technology and tactics. Since early 2024, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has executed multi-wave launches leveraging a diverse arsenal that includes short and medium-range ballistic missiles (e.g., Fateh-110, Zolfaghar, Khorramshahr-4), cruise missiles, and Shahed-series one-way attack drones. Each attack features distinct technological mixes, targeting military and energy infrastructure within US-allied Gulf states and Israel, as well as maritime assets in the Red Sea and beyond. The explicit objective underpinning these operations is not conventional battlefield victory, but the pursuit of strategic objectives—specifically, 'deterrence by endurance' and imposing unsustainable costs on adversary air defenses. This is evidenced by saturation attacks, diversified targeting, and persistent pressure on high-value installations. Events such as the increased frequency of missile tests—Khorramshahr-4's deployment and extensive operational use of Shahed-136 drones—demonstrate both ongoing capability refinement and Iran's commitment to changing the regional calculus. The deliberate choice of targets, including energy transit chokepoints and allied territory, further signals an effort to fracture US-centric security architecture and exploit critical industrial bottlenecks in Western defense supply chains. Thus, Iran's current strategy marks a coherent, adaptive campaign with implications for global military doctrine and deterrence theory.

Stakeholder Analysis

Analysis of the key actors in the Iran-centered missile escalation highlights a highly asymmetric contest of endurance and strategic signaling. The IRGC directs its campaign with high leverage derived from an extensive, dispersed missile inventory and resilient command infrastructure. Proxies—including the Houthis and Hezbollah—amplify Iran's reach, stretching defensive resources and complicating attribution, while simultaneously introducing risks of escalation that can threaten Iran's plausible deniability. Meanwhile, the United States and Israel rely on technologically advanced, but expensive and logistically constrained, missile defense networks such as Patriot, Arrow, and Iron Dome. Gulf states, positioned on the front lines of both targeting and alliance politics, face acute security and economic risks and are increasingly reassessing their dependence on US protection. Key indicators—such as public statements from Saudi and UAE officials about independent security postures and observations of new hardened shelters at Iranian missile facilities—will be critical in monitoring Iran's ongoing capacity and the cohesion of the US-led regional security system.



Actor	Stated Position	Leverage	Veto Power	Key Indicator to Watch
Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)	Intensify missile/drone attacks for endurance-based deterrence/cost imposition	HIGH	YES	Expansion of hardened missile sites (satellite imagery)
United States (CENTCOM)	Defend allies, maintain regional naval and air defense postures	HIGH	YES	Patriot/THAAD depletion rates; forward deployed naval groups
Israel (IDF)	Intercept threats; protect critical infrastructure	MEDIUM	NO	Iron Dome/Arrow readiness; mass interceptor purchases
Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, UAE)	Maintain stability, reassess alliance commitments	MEDIUM	NO	Security cooperation levels with US/region
Houthis/Hezbollah	Project Iranian power, expand threat vectors	MEDIUM	NO	Rates of missile/drone launches from Yemen/Lebanon

Leverage: HIGH=red, MEDIUM=amber, LOW=green; Veto Power: YES=red, NO=green.

Geopolitical & Security Implications

The operational transformation set in motion by Iran is reconfiguring alliances, deterrence, and regional balance-of-power calculations on an unprecedented scale. Iran's pursuit of multi-layered, staged aspirational missile barrages across a wide regional footprint is a calculated challenge to established US defense architectures. The strategic intent to induce alliance fragmentation is clear—evidence includes the increased hedging by Gulf states and partial official signals of declining reliance on US security guarantees. The force disposition matrix further illustrates a forward-deployed, saturation-capable missile structure operated from mobile and hardened positions across Iran, complemented by integrated proxy launch networks in Yemen and Lebanon. While proxies amplify disruptive potential and impose additional defensive burdens, they also carry escalation risks for Iran if attribution leads to punitive strikes on Iranian territory. Yet, the greatest threat lies not only in physical destruction but in the erosion of deterrence credibility; if expensive interceptors are depleted at a rate unsupportable by current production, the psychological and strategic balance may tip. Overarching all of this is the implicit nuclear delivery capability embedded in Iran's advanced missile program, especially the emergence of hypersonic systems, which compress escalation timeframes and increase ambiguity in adversary response decisions.



Actor	Asset Type	Location	Readiness
Iran (IRGC)	Ballistic Missile Brigades	Underground sites across Iran	DEPLOYED
Iran (IRGC)	Shahed-series Drone Units	Mobile platforms across Iran	DEPLOYED
Hezbollah	Fajr-5/Zelzal Missile Units	Southern Lebanon	DEPLOYED
Houthi Movement	Ballistic/Anti-ship Missile Units	Western Yemen	DEPLOYED
Israel (IDF)	Integrated Air Defense System	Nationwide, borders	DEPLOYED
United States (CENTCOM)	Patriot/THAAD Batteries	Qatar, UAE, Kuwait	DEPLOYED
United States (CENTCOM)	Carrier Strike Group	Arabian Sea	DEPLOYED

Force disposition lists actor, asset type, deployment location, and operational readiness.

Economic Transmission Channels

Iran’s targeting of Gulf states and maritime chokepoints is a form of strategic coercion that transmits political risk directly into global markets. Missile attacks threaten energy transit points such as the Strait of Hormuz and Red Sea, driving volatility in oil prices and insurance premiums. The economic impact extends to trade routes, where commercial shipping faces rerouting and higher costs, while the mere threat of escalation can impact foreign direct investment flows into the region. Prolonged uncertainty and sustained attacks also risk undermining regional currency stability and triggering capital flight. The magnitude and timeline of these effects depend on the frequency and scale of attacks, as well as allied states’ ability to sustain credible, cost-effective defense.

Channel	Mechanism	Magnitude	Timeline
Oil/Energy	Attacks on infrastructure/shipping lanes	High (oil price spikes)	Immediate-Short term
Trade Routes	Maritime missile/drone threats	Medium (shipping reroutes, cost escalation)	Short-Medium term
Sanctions	Escalation drives new sanctions/seizures	Medium	Medium-Long term
FDI Flows	Regional insecurity, capital flight	Medium	Medium term
Currency	Confidence shocks in Gulf currencies	Low to Medium	Short-Medium term
Remittances	Labor exodus from high-threat zones	Low	Long term

Magnitude: High/Medium/Low relative to baseline regional market volatility. Timeline: period from attack/event to visible impact.



Scenario Matrix

Iran's ongoing missile and drone activity opens several plausible scenarios for the region, each with unique triggers and consequences for global military adaptation and economic stability. The base case is continued, periodic saturation attacks calibrated to sustain economic and psychological pressure while remaining below the threshold of direct, large-scale retaliation. Escalation scenarios—such as direct Iranian strikes causing major US or Israeli casualties, or operational deployment of hypersonic glide vehicles—would likely provoke kinetic responses and unrestrained regional conflict.

De-escalation is possible via sustained diplomatic engagement or demonstrated effectiveness of new, scalable defensive systems. A black swan outcome could involve breakdowns in attribution leading to inadvertent nuclear signaling or loss of control by proxies.

Scenario	Probability	Key Trigger	Market/Economic Impact	Recommended Action
Base Case: Sustained Missile/Drone Campaign	60%	Routine multi-wave attacks on regional targets	Continued oil/market volatility, gradual FDI impact	Accelerate low-cost interceptor, DEW deployment
Escalation: Major Retaliatory Strikes/Proxy Overreach	20%	Direct hit on US/Israeli critical assets or mass casualties	Severe supply shock, regional capital flight	Ready offensive and 'left-of-launch' options; reinforce alliances
De-escalation: Diplomatic Stand-down	15%	Third-party mediation, economic pressure on Iran	Normalization of trade, oil prices stabilize	Advance confidence-building measures; coordinate sanctions relief
Black Swan: Uncontrolled Proxy/Nuclear Escalation	5%	Loss of command or misattribution involving HGV/nuclear systems	Systemic market crisis, energy embargo	Establish crisis communication, escalate reconnaissance

Probability: scenario likelihood within next 12 months. Market Impact: qualitative assessment derived from historical analogs and observed 2024 trends.

Historical Precedents

The current missile escalation shares critical features with past region-wide missile campaigns, yet is distinct in its intensity and technological complexity. The Iran-Iraq 'War of the Cities' of the 1980s illustrated how sustained missile barrages can impose strategic psychological and demographic pressure, yet did not feature today's cost-exchange or technological asymmetries. During the 2019 Abqaiq-Khuras drone and cruise missile attack, Iran demonstrated multi-vector targeting and plausible deniability via proxies, foreshadowing the present campaign. Israel's 2021 conflicts with Gaza



showcased advanced missile defenses, but at dramatic expenditure rates unsustainable against persistent, high-volume attacks like those now used by Iran. The evidence from these precedents highlights both the limitations of passive/reactive defense and the risks of escalation through proxy overreach or critical infrastructure attacks.

Precedent	Year	Outcome	Relevance to Current Situation
Iran-Iraq War 'War of the Cities'	1984-88	Sustained civilian and economic disruption, no decisive victory	Precedent for endurance-based deterrence; less advanced technology
Abqaiq-Khurais Attack (Saudi Arabia)	2019	Temporary global oil price shock, no direct war	Early example of integrated drone/cruise attacks and proxy use
Gaza Missile Campaign vs. Iron Dome	2021	High interception rates, rapid interceptor depletion	Cost-exchange and stockpile vulnerabilities surfaced

Precedents chosen for technology, scale, and impact similarities; Outcomes denote strategic effect, not just military results.

Risk Assessment

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigation
Interceptor depletion undermines regional air defense	High	Critical	Accelerate production of low-cost, scalable interceptors and deploy operational Directed Energy Weapons by Q2 2025.
Allied fragmentation as Gulf states hedge away from US protection	Medium	High	Initiate alliance-building with deeper intelligence sharing and integrated defense planning.
Missile/drone technology proliferation increases risk of uncontrolled escalation via proxies	Medium	High	Increase monitoring of proxy launch activity and establish robust mechanisms for attribution and response coordination.
Industrial bottlenecks delay deployment of cost-effective countermeasures	Medium	High	Form a defense industrial base acceleration task force focused on rapid prototyping and supply chain expansion.
Emergent Iranian HGVs bypass existing missile defenses	Low	Critical	Fast-track R&D and multinational investment in anti-HGV technologies; ramp up ISR for early HGV indicator detection.

Strategic Recommendations

Immediate

- Initiate surge manufacturing program for low-cost, mass-producible interceptors and rapidly operationalize Directed Energy Weapons for drone defense. (Owner: Military procurement and R&D agencies) — Expected: Restored defensive sustainability and improved cost-exchange ratios against saturation attacks.



Short-term

- Deepen alliance structures through shared intelligence platforms and integrated regional air defense exercises. (Owner: Defense ministries of US, Israel, Gulf states) — Expected: Increased collective resilience and credible deterrence posture.

Medium-term

- Advance development of 'left-of-launch' cyber and EW capabilities to disrupt Iranian command and missile logistics. (Owner: Special operations and cyber commands) — Expected: Reduction in volume and precision of inbound missile/drone threats.

Long-term

- Accelerate multinational R&D on anti-hypersonic defense and ISR for early warning of advanced missile deployments. (Owner: Defense R&D consortia) — Expected: Mitigation of breakthrough Iranian missile capabilities; preservation of deterrence.

Limitations & Unknowns

- The analysis could not determine the precise number of missiles and drones launched in each Iranian attack due to incomplete open-source data.
- There is insufficient open-source evidence on the real-time operational readiness of hypersonic glide vehicles in the IRGC arsenal.
- Long-term societal and demographic effects of persistent missile/drone threat on urban migration patterns remain under-studied.
- Supply chain specifics of Western air defense production were unavailable, limiting granularity of industrial bottleneck assessment.

Verification Summary

Verified (3)

- VERIFIED** The Patriot PAC-3 interceptor has a maximum speed of approximately Mach 5 and an
- VERIFIED** The Iron Beam Directed Energy Weapon (DEW) has a range of up to 10 km and operates
- VERIFIED** Iran's missile arsenal is estimated to include over 3,000 ballistic missiles. (Iran's Ballistic

Unverified (2)

- UNVERIFIED** Exact operational readiness and numbers of hypersonic glide vehicles in Iranian arsenal.
- UNVERIFIED** Detailed missile and drone penetration rates.



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