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The Limits of Resistance: a Realist View of Iran's Vulnerabilities in Deterrence and Power Projection

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Abstract

This article examines the vulnerabilities exposed during Iran's war with Israel in June 2025, as well as the regional and international reactions to the conflict. It seeks to identify the military, strategic, and political weaknesses revealed during the war and to propose measures through which Iran may address these shortcomings in the future. The study also assesses the effectiveness of Iran's defense strategy and the broader implications of the conflict for regional security dynamics in the Middle East. The findings suggest that, despite widespread expectations of a decisive Israeli advantage, Iran demonstrated considerable resilience and military capability during the June 2025 conflict. Iranian resistance, which continued to be evident during subsequent confrontations in February 2026, highlighted the country's ability to absorb and respond to external military pressure. Nevertheless, the conflict exposed significant vulnerabilities in Iran's military infrastructure, air defense systems, intelligence capabilities, and strategic deterrence posture. These weaknesses raised important questions regarding the sustainability and effectiveness of Iran's existing security strategy. The study is primarily based on secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, media analyses, and official statements. A brief review of the relevant literature examines Iran's deterrence policy, its reliance on non-state actors and proxy networks, and its broader regional security doctrine. By analyzing the conduct and consequences of the war, the article contributes to understanding the strengths and limitations of Iran's military power and offers policy recommendations aimed at enhancing its defensive capabilities and reducing vulnerabilities in future conflicts.

Keywords: Iran, Israel, Iran–Israel Conflict (2025), Military Vulnerabilities, Deterrence Strategy, Non-State Actors, Regional Security Dynamics

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Introduction:

The Iran-Israel relations have been strained since the Islamic revolution of 1979 and have included ideological differences, proxy warfare and regional competition. Iran has led 'an axis of resistance' against U.S power in the Middle East and has used asymmetric warfare, missiles and non-state actors to deter potential adversaries such as Israel and United States. The 'axis of resistance' has allowed Iran to be not fully engaged in war and, yet deter potential enemies and shape outcomes in the region for a number of years. However, the confrontation in June, 2025 between Iran on one side and Israel and the U.S on the other side has shown Iran's military and technological limits. Its ability to use missiles effectively against Israel was commendable but it also revealed limits of Iran's military power.

The Iranian missiles managed to hit cities like Tel Aviv innumerable times despite Israel's advanced air defense systems. However, Iranian defense systems didn't prove to be effective in stopping Israeli attacks. Israel backed by the U.S and most Western States showed great dominance and struck Iranian sites with greater intensity. The Iranian proxy network was dealt separately by Israel and they didn't respond as a single, cohesive force to deal decisive blows to Israel.

Iran's regional posture has long been shaped by a combination of ideology and strategic necessity [1,2]. In the early years of Islamic revolution after 1979, Iran pursued Islamic ideology and the fears of spread of revolutionary ideals alarmed the GCC countries. But, the contemporary posture of Iran can be seen as status quo oriented and Iranian strategy of survival against much more formidable foes like U.S and Israel.

The article argues that Iran's power appeared formidable before the war but was constrained by limitations. The war with Israel showed the limits of Iran's technological and domestic constraints.

Research Questions.

1. What vulnerabilities were revealed in Iran's deterrence during Israel-Iran conflict?
2. What domestic, economic and regional limitations hampered Iran's actions?

Literature review:

(I) Realist theory and deterrence.

Realists have long viewed international politics as anarchic and a struggle for survival. Kenneth Waltz (1979) treats States as pragmatic actors looking for security using military means [3]. Mearsheimer is an adherent of offensive realism and believes that States seek maximum power and go on the offensive to achieve their goals [4]. Deterrence is successful when a State possesses viable military options and the determination to act.

In the Middle East, Israel has the military edge because of complete support whether it is political, economic and military by the U.S and Western Europe. Israel possesses a qualitative military edge, including advanced air defenses, precision-guided weaponry and cyber capabilities [5]. Robert A. Pape argues that, "coercive attempts often fail, even when assailants have superior capability and inflict great punishment on the target State" [6]. Israel's high –tech defensive and offensive capabilities made it difficult for Iran to influence Israel through sustained attrition.

(2) Iran's 'forward defense' doctrine.

Over the years , Iran has adopted a policy of 'forward defense' or 'offensive defense' as a military strategy. It means, " inclusion of offensive aspects into Iran's military strategy which used to have an overwhelmingly defensive nature, it is also used to justify Iran's military presence beyond its borders." [7]. Throughout the decades of 2000 and 2010's, Iran strategy of forward defense seemed to be paying off in Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. Yet, in the recent Iran-Israel war, the forward defense policy of Iran showed it's weakness, when the Israeli attacks were conducted inside Iran rather than faraway from its borders. The outbreak of direct conflict suggests that deterrence between Iran and Israel had weakened significantly. Despite years of indirect confrontation, both sides crossed escalation thresholds, indicating that traditional deterrence frameworks were no longer effective in managing their rivalry [8].

From the perspective of John Mearsheimer, Iran's inability to translate regional influence into decisive military outcomes reflects the limits of power projection in a system dominated by superior military powers. Realists believe that its great powers that mainly make the big decisions in the international arena but middle powers such as Iran have shown that they can project power which can engulf the whole region.

(3).Proxy warfare and Non-State Actors.

Iran's use of non-State actors, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, popular mobilization forces in Iraq and Houthis in Yemen has been widely debated by scholars. Vali Nasr writes, " In Lebanon, Iran has successfully forced the United States and France out of the country..... that conclusion left and indelible impression on Iran [9]. Later, Iranian proxies increased its influence tremendously in the Middle East and there was talk of a Shia Crescent by authors such as Vali Nasr. Iran seemed to be in the ascendancy, while the power of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries seemed to be below that of Iran. Iran's regional influence expanded significantly after 2003 through the mobilization of Shia political and militant networks across the Middle East. This "Shia Crescent" enhanced Tehran's strategic depth and allowed it to project power indirectly [10]

Iran's Deterrence and Its Vulnerabilities.

The devastating blows that Israel inflicted upon Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas and Houthis has shown the limits of proxies and their deterrence. The perception of Iranian prowess was formidable and showed the a strong arm of Iran throughout the Middle East but against Israel, it showed the limits of Iranian capabilities. Over the course of 12 days war with Israel, Iran showed with a good measure its missile and drones capabilities. Yet there were several weaknesses that came to the limelight.

(1) Missile Forces.

Despite the debilitating sanctions imposed on Iran by U.S, Iran proved that it has the missiles to overwhelm any foreign power in the Middle East. Iranian missiles had to cover thousands of miles, flying over air space of U.S friendly countries and then had to pass through Israel's defenses such as Iron Dome, David's sling and Arrow 3. Few of the missiles that caught the Israelis off-guard, they were shocked by the size and ferocity of the devastation. It led to the Israeli politicians to stop the coverage of devastation caused by the missiles. Even, then it showed the limits of Iranian missiles capabilities and the meaningful damage they could inflict." Iran's missile program serves as a key pillar of its deterrence strategy, compensating for weaknesses in conventional military power. By developing long-range capabilities, Iran seeks to impose potential costs on adversaries. This approach reflects a rational adaptation to asymmetric constraints" [9]. Rockets and missiles do more than compensate for the Iran's lack of air strength and modernization. They give Iran credibility in being able to suddenly launch attacks from highly disperse sites and in ways that require far less training and readiness than air forces [11]

(2) Air defense Weaknesses.

In June 2025, when Israeli airforce's pre-emptive attacks shocked the Iranians, the Iranian air defense failed to detect or counter the attacks. The Israeli air forces and drones penetrated Iranian airspace and attacked high value targets, killing top Iranian commanders in the initial attacks.

(3) Cyber Vulnerabilities.

Iran and Israel have conducted cyber-war against each other for more than a decade. The Israeli Stuxnet attacks in 2010 on Iranian nuclear installations was a major attack. In Nov. 2020, it is believed that Israel killed a top Iranian nuclear scientist, Hohen Fakrizadeh with an AI-assisted gun.

Israel had more sophisticated cyber-war capabilities on the first day of attacks on June 13, 2025, Israel managed to disrupt Iranian air defense and assassinated top Iranian nuclear scientists and military officials. The cyber attacks disrupted Iranian communications and limited Iran's ability to respond quickly. It showed Iran's vulnerabilities in the cyber domain.

(4) Iran's economic and domestic constraints.

The sanctions imposed on Iran by U.S and other Western countries have severely curtailed the Iranian economy. Despite the economic sanctions, the Iranian missile and drone capabilities have been enhanced. The U.S has been trying for a number of years to mobilize the Iranians against the Islamic regime but it has failed to deter the Iranian leadership to either collapse or change course.

The sanctions on Iran have led to decrease in government revenues, hampered energy exports and restricted access to advanced military technology. The attacks in June showed the glaring difference between advanced F-35 airplanes of Israel and outdated Iranian aircraft. According to Suzanne Maloney, “Economic sanctions have placed significant pressure on Iran’s economy by restricting trade, reducing oil revenues, and limiting access to global financial systems. However, they have not fundamentally altered the strategic behavior of the Iranian state. Instead, sanctions have reinforced Iran’s reliance on self-sufficiency and asymmetric strategies” [12].

Regional and International Environment.

(1) Gulf countries and Israel.

The Gulf countries have been dependent on the U.S for their security for a number of years and the U.S has several military bases in the Gulf countries. UAE and Bahrain signed the Abraham accords during President Trump’s first term in office and during the Israeli genocide in Gaza, the Gulf countries avoided any criticism of Israel. “The competition between Iran and GCC states is shaped by both geopolitical rivalry and ideological differences. While sectarian narratives are often emphasized, the underlying drivers are security concerns and regional influence. This rivalry has encouraged Gulf states to align more closely with external powers” [13].

The Gulf countries tried to maintain a delicate balance and pursued de-escalation of tensions between Israel and Iran while protecting their economic and security interests. The Gulf countries refused to be drawn into any escalatory war between Iran and Israel. Any regional war risks oil infrastructure, shipping lanes, investment and tourism [14].

(2) Russian and Chinese Support for Iran.

Russia and China were cautious in their support for Iran mainly because Russia is deeply involved in the Ukraine War while China doesn’t want to get involved in any military confrontation with the U.S. Iran supplied ballistic missiles and drones to Russia during the Ukraine war, while Russia had supplied air defense and other systems to Iran. However, Russia didn’t openly support Iran during the war with Israel. Public Russian statements during the June crisis condemned Israeli strikes and offered mediation rather than announcing combat assistance [15]

China is one of the largest buyers of Iranian oil and has deep trade relations with Iran. China has taken advantage of buying cheap oil from Iran and Russia when the two

countries are facing severe Western sanctions. There is no authoritative open evidence that Beijing sent Chinese combat aircraft air-defense batteries or technical crews to Iran. Analysts described China's posture as "low profile" and risk averse [16].

Iran's weak diplomatic leverage.

The twelve day war showed the weakness of Iran on the diplomatic front. While most of the Middle Eastern people supported Iran and condemned Israel, the Head of States seemed reluctant to support Iran. In the initial days of Israeli attacks, Iran seemed isolated and vulnerable, while Israel had the tacit Western countries support. However, the war helped Iran in unifying the nation under the banner of Iranian nationalism and the U.S and Israeli plans of regime change and Iran imploding internally didn't materialise. Nouri and Parmar [14] argue that "Iran had withstood the Israeli-US offensive, retaliated with unprecedented drone and missile barrages, and emerged more unified. Its ability to conduct hybrid warfare against a technologically superior adversary reshaped perceptions of its military credibility. Israel, by contrast, found itself unable to escalate – a ground invasion was unviable, the economy teetered, and international pressure mounted. After 12 days of war, a US brokered ceasefire was accepted not out of triumph, but necessity.

How Iran Can Reduce Its Vulnerabilities.

(I) Reforms and Freedom.

One of the most pressing issues facing Iran is the national cohesion and internal stability. The Islamic regime has been in power since 1979 and the region has changed since then. With the passage of time, revolutionary States lose their appeal and people begin to demand greater freedom and reforms. Iran is in a similar dilemma, the old guard and revolutionaries know that people desire reforms and greater freedom. All of these voices—reformists, moderates, and IRGC pragmatists along with their like-minded politicians and bureaucrats—share a common position on the need for change. They have looked to join hands to present the Islamic Republic with a viable way forward [1]. With the increasing usage of internet and social media, the Iranian youth can see what is happening around the world and want change. However, one thing may be accounted for, that, the Iranian and eastern concept greater openness and freedom maybe slight different than Western ones. Iran has a civilization that has spanned over thousands of years, with their own distinct culture and history and demanding Western concepts of reforms and freedoms from Iranian society may be unrealistic and unjust. Furthermore, it can be added that, through social media and other outlets one can witness that women have been given much more freedom in Iranian society in the recent years. It means that Iranian authorities are aware that people need greater openness but are wary of Western interventions to ferment uprisings in the country. In the protests in Iran in December 2025, it was widely believed that the protests were instigated by Western countries and the people who were killed and injured were exaggerated to astronomical figures. There are deep grievances of Iranians, but many of them such as high inflation are due to the Western sanctions imposed on Iran. Zweiri [16] argues

that,"Iran's leadership now advances two competing narratives to explain the demonstrations. The first, articulated by the supreme leader and the president, centres on failures in economic governance and recognises that sanctions alone cannot account for the depth of the crisis. The second, promoted by the security establishment, continues to emphasise the role of external actors in inciting unrest and targeting the regime.

(2) Regional diplomacy and coordination with proxies.

The Iranian proxies were seen as the strong arm of Iran across the Middle East but Israel continued to deal devastating blows to Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthis Israel dealt with each Iranian proxy separately and there seemed to be a lack of cohesive attack by Iran and proxies at the same time.

The Gulf States have been apprehensive about rising power of Iran for a number of years and have aligned with U.S for their security. UAE and Bahrain signed the Abraham accords and felt much more comfortable in aligning with Israel than Iran. The GCC States and Iran, despite a shared historical experience and having similar cultural and economic links, have divergent visions for the region. The GCC states despite have close links with the U.S and agreement with Israel, can't shake of the fact that Iran is their immediate neighbour and the Islamic regime has proved to be resilient, surviving for over forty years in the face of intense U.S economic and military pressure.

From limited war to a regional conflict:

On Feb, 28, 2026, U.S and Israel attacked Iran again for the second time in six months despite the fact that talks were going on between US and Iran, mediated by Oman. The completely illegal and unjust attacks by US and Israel in the midst of talks (for the second time after June, 2025) showed the disregard for international legal rules. President Trump hoped for a quick victory by quick decapitation strikes against the Iranian leadership (assassination of Ayatollah Khomeini). However, the Iranian response stunned the U.S when they began to attack U.S bases in the GCC States, closed the Strait of Hormuz which sent global oil prices soaring. It became clear very quickly that U.S had no long term strategy and President Trump's statements shifted between calls for regime change, the destruction of Iran's nuclear and missile programs and reopening the Strait of Hormuz.

The attacks by US and Israel destroyed Iran's critical infrastructure, killed the leadership but failed to alter Iranian stance on its missile and nuclear program. According to Pape, "Military coercion does not always produce desired political outcomes, even when superior force is applied. States often absorb punishment without conceding to demands, especially when core security interests are involved

Conclusion.

The research article set out to answer the questions that what were the vulnerabilities of Iran during the June 2025 war with Israel and constraint Iran faced during the war. The article discussed Iranian deterrence policy and reliance on non-State actors as a strategic policy. The study illustrates that despite Iran facing sanctions, it showed remarkable resilience in the face of Israeli and U.S. onslaught. The article underlines that Iran is facing immense strains due to war in military and economic terms and the survival of the State is at risk. Russia and China have covertly supported Iran during the conflict through intelligence sharing, satellite imagery and military assistance. The article suggests that the future course of action for Iranians maybe to provide greater freedom and openness to the Iranian population but the Iranian government remains apprehensive about potential U.S. and Israeli support for fermenting uprisings within Iran. The article also briefly discusses the war between US and Iran that started in February 2026.

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