



By: TA | AP Insight

# To what extent is Iran able to defend itself against a possible new attack?



With one American carrier strike group already in the Middle East and another apparently **on its way** as U.S. President Donald Trump ramps up **pressure on Iran** to give up its nuclear program, fears are rising of the outbreak of another war that could spread into a regional conflict.

The **12-day Israel-Iran war** last year appeared to cripple key elements of Iran's military, yet left its capabilities far from neutralized — a distinction that looms large as tensions rise again.

If hostilities erupt again, the risk of a broader protracted conflict returns, especially if Iran's leadership sees the fight as one for its existence.

## Open skies

The June 13-24 war started when Israel launched strikes targeting Iran's nuclear program and top military officials.

The United States joined the conflict, hitting three nuclear sites with massive **"bunker-buster"** bombs dropped from B-2 stealth bombers that flew their mission from their home base in Missouri.

It was a risky move for Trump, who has criticized his predecessors for involving the U.S. in **"stupid wars,"** but Iran responded weakly, with a limited missile attack on an American military base in Qatar that it warned Washington of in advance, and which caused no casualties. Tehran and Israel then both agreed to a **ceasefire**.

Israel was able to significantly degrade Iran's air defenses with airstrikes and covert attacks from teams on the ground. Iran, presumably aware that its older F-14 and MiG-29 fighters were no match for the fifth-generation American F-35 stealth fighters and other aircraft flown by Israel, also never sent its air force into action.

That left the skies clear for Israel to carry out waves of attacks, and for the U.S. to hit **Iran's**

**nuclear facilities** and get out of Iranian airspace without the B-2 bombers ever being fired upon.

**The sky is open for American and Israeli planes. The problem is how to defend the region from the retaliation – Sascha Bruchmann**

If hostilities resume, that scenario is likely to repeat, said Sascha Bruchmann, a defense analyst with the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Bahrain.

"In practical terms, in reductionist terms, the sky is open for American and Israeli planes," he said. "The problem is how to defend the region from the retaliation."

Bruchmann said in the case of an expanded war, Iran would most likely hit back by targeting U.S. bases in the region, but could also attack oil infrastructure and mine the Strait of Hormuz, which links the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, through which about a fifth of the world's oil is transported.

They could also attempt to hit the American aircraft carriers, though they're well defended by the destroyers in their strike groups, Bruchmann said.

"If the regime itself believes its survival is at stake, which it did not believe in June last year, I think the game is different," he said. "If you have a ... regime that thinks it's about to go down, when why would you hold back with retaliation?"

## Iran's missile cupboard

Iran fired hundreds of missiles during the 12-day war and used more than 1,000 attack drones, killing nearly three dozen Israeli civilians and wounding thousands.

Danny Citrinowicz, a researcher at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies and a former Iran specialist in Israel's military and

intelligence services, said that it remains unclear how much missile capacity Iran has rebuilt.

“You can see through **satellite imagery**, attempts to restart manufacturing,” he said, adding that government leaks in Israeli media suggest that Israel assumes Iran still retains a substantial number of short-range ballistic missiles.

Israeli strikes last year focused on what officials saw as the most immediate threats — Iran’s medium- and long-range missiles — leaving Tehran with a reduced but far from eliminated ability to threaten Israel. Its ability to hit nearby U.S. bases with short range missiles, seems barely diminished.

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“The short-range ballistic missiles did not suffer any significant hit whatsoever in the 12-day war,” Citrinowicz said.

Iran's exact capabilities aren't known, but it's thought to still have more than 1,000 long range missiles that could hit Israel, and several thousand of the shorter-range missiles that could be used to hit American bases or other targets nearby, Bruchmann said.

Missile stockpiles matter only if a country retains the systems to launch them. Israel also took out many of Iran's launchers, but wasn't able to destroy them completely, and it seems likely that Iran will have been working hard to rebuild that capacity.

## Very different stakes

Iran's military vastly **outnumbers** that of Israel, with about 600,000 regular troops and 200,000 in the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, including the elite Quds Force.

In the past they have also relied on proxy

forces. Those include Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthi rebels in Yemen.



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But each has been so degraded by recent fighting that it's an open question whether they would be able — or willing — to come to Iran's assistance from Gaza, Lebanon or Yemen.

A bigger threat might come from Iran-linked militias in Iraq, which could threaten U.S. forces on the ground there.

Israel has around 170,000 members of active duty forces and another 400,000 reserves. But even though their military is smaller, many have been battle hardened by regional conflicts and they also have the latest U.S. and European equipment as well as a robust domestic defense industry.

It also has the support of the U.S., both with its naval assets and multiple bases in the Middle East, including **Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar**, which hosts thousands of American troops and is the forward headquarters for U.S. Central Command.

But beyond comparing numbers and capabilities, Bruchmann said that when thinking about a possible all-out conflict, one has to look at what the sides are willing to risk.

“My assumption is that Americans are trying to plan for zero casualties,” he said. “We're talking regime survival versus a zero casualty intervention — so just phenomenally different stakes.”