

**ASYMMETRIC WARFARE:
IRAN'S TOOLS IN CONFRONTING THE MILITARY SUPERIORITY OF THE
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA**

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Abstract: This study examines the topic of asymmetric warfare by presenting key definitions of the concept in international relations and then analyzing the tools and strategies Iran employs to counter the military and technological superiority of the United States and Israel, the two dominant parties in the conflict. The study aims to understand how Iran has developed a unique style of confrontation that relies on unconventional means to compensate for the significant gap in conventional military power. The study focuses on the most prominent tools of asymmetric warfare used by Iran, such as supporting allies and armed groups in the region, developing ballistic missile and drone programs, and utilizing cyber capabilities, media warfare, and psychological warfare. It also explores the role of the ideological and political dimensions in bolstering Iranian influence within the Middle East and the extent to which these tools diminish the effectiveness of American military superiority. Furthermore, the study seeks to highlight the implications of this type of warfare for regional and international security, analyzing the ability of asymmetric warfare to create a relative balance in modern conflicts, particularly when weaker states or entities confront a military power superior in terms of technology and conventional capabilities.

Keywords: *Asymmetric warfare, Iran, United States, Israel, Ideological dimension, Strategies.*

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**ASİMETRİK SAVAŞ:
İRAN'IN AMERİKA BİRLEŞİK DEVLETLERİ'NİN ASKERİ ÜSTÜNLÜĞÜNE
KARŞI KULLANDIĞI ARAÇLAR**

Öz: Bu çalışma, asimetrik savaş konusunu, uluslararası ilişkilerdeki kavramın temel tanımlarını sunarak ve ardından İran'ın, çatışmanın iki baskın tarafı olan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve İsrail'in askeri ve teknolojik üstünlüğüne karşı koymak için kullandığı araç ve stratejileri analiz ederek inceliyor. Çalışma, İran'ın geleneksel askeri güçteki önemli açığı telafi etmek için alışılmadık yöntemlere dayanan benzersiz bir çatışma tarzı geliştirmesini anlamayı amaçlıyor. Çalışma, İran tarafından kullanılan asimetrik savaşın en belirgin araçlarına odaklanıyor; bunlar arasında bölgedeki müttefikleri ve silahlı grupları desteklemek, balistik füze ve insansız hava aracı programları geliştirmek ve siber yetenekleri, medya savaşını ve psikolojik savaş kullanmak yer alıyor. Ayrıca, İran'ın Ortadoğu'daki etkisini güçlendirmede ideolojik ve siyasi boyutların rolünü ve bu araçların Amerikan askeri üstünlüğünün etkinliğini ne ölçüde azalttığını da araştırıyor. Ayrıca, bu çalışma, özellikle daha zayıf devletler veya oluşumlar teknoloji ve konvansiyonel yetenekler açısından üstün bir askeri güçle karşı karşıya geldiğinde, asimetrik savaşın modern çatışmalarda göreceli bir denge yaratma yeteneğini analiz ederek, bu tür savaşın bölgesel ve uluslararası güvenlik üzerindeki etkilerini vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır.

Keywords: *Asimetrik Savaş, İran, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, İsrail, İdeolojik Boyut, Stratejiler.*

Introduction

The international system has witnessed profound transformations in the nature of conflicts and wars in recent decades. Military confrontations are no longer limited to traditional wars between regular armies of comparable capabilities and organization. New patterns of conflict have emerged, relying on unconventional methods and alternative strategies aimed at compensating for the imbalance of power between the warring parties. In this context, the concept of “*asymmetric warfare*” has emerged as one of the most important modern concepts in security and international relations studies. It refers to a conflict between a party possessing significant military, technological, and economic superiority, and a relatively weaker party that relies on unconventional means and methods to weaken its adversary and diminish the impact of its military superiority.

The conflict between Iran and the United States is one of the most prominent contemporary examples of this type of warfare, especially given the significant disparity in military and technological capabilities between the two sides. The United States is considered one of the world’s strongest military powers, possessing a sophisticated arsenal, a global military presence, and extensive technological and intelligence superiority. In contrast, Iran recognized decades ago that engaging in a direct conventional military confrontation with a power of this magnitude could lead to significant losses and threaten its national security and the stability of its political system. This prompted it to adopt unconventional strategies based on the principle of attrition and avoid direct confrontation.

From this perspective, Iran has developed a diverse range of tools within the framework of asymmetric warfare. These tools have enabled Iran to expand its regional influence and create a kind of indirect balance with American power, despite the significant disparity in conventional military capabilities.

Studying this topic is particularly important given the increasing reliance on asymmetric warfare tactics in modern conflicts. Many states and armed groups are resorting to this type of warfare to confront major powers and advanced regular armies. Furthermore, studying the Iranian case contributes to understanding the nature of the transformations occurring in the concept of power in international relations. Traditional military superiority alone is no longer sufficient to achieve decisive results in conflicts; rather, the ability to employ unconventional tools has become a fundamental factor in managing conflicts and achieving political and strategic objectives. This article, therefore, seeks to examine the concept of asymmetric warfare and analyze the most important tools Iran employs to counter American military superiority. It

highlights the effectiveness of these tools and their impact on regional and international power balances, in addition to exploring the implications of this type of warfare for the future of security and stability in the Middle East. This leads us to pose the following question:

- How has Iran, despite its limited conventional military capabilities compared to the United States, managed to develop asymmetric warfare strategies that guarantee its deterrence and regional influence?

To answer this question, we must break it down into several sub-questions:

- What is meant by asymmetric warfare in international relations?
- What tools does Iran use in this type of warfare?
- To what extent have these tools succeeded in achieving deterrence against the United States?
- What are the successes and failures of this strategy?

This leads us to the following hypotheses:

- Iran relies primarily on unconventional tools to compensate for its military weakness.
- Asymmetric warfare allowed Iran to impose a form of indirect deterrence.
- Despite its relative success, this strategy remains limited in the face of overwhelming American power.

An analytical approach was used to examine the data and various statements issued by the leaders of the warring states, as well as a case study methodology, to study the topic and attempt to clearly answer the question posed.

1. The Theoretical Framework of Asymmetric Warfare

1.1. Definition of Asymmetric Warfare

Asymmetric warfare, or asymmetric engagement, is a type of warfare between two opposing sides whose military strength, strategy, or tactics differ significantly. This type of warfare often, but not necessarily, involves insurgents or resistance militias who may have the status of unlawful combatants against a regular army.³

³ Brendan Luyt (2015), "Debating reliable sources: writing the history of the Vietnam War on Wikipedia", *Journal of Documentation*, 71(3), pp. 440-455.

Asymmetric warfare can also describe a conflict in which the resources of the combatants are unequal, and thus each may attempt to exploit the relative weaknesses of the other. Such conflicts often involve unconventional warfare, where the weaker side attempts to use a strategy to compensate for deficiencies in the number or quality of its forces and equipment. This contrasts with “*equal warfare*”, where the two opposing forces possess similar military strength and resources and rely on similar tactics.⁴

Asymmetric warfare can be considered a form of modern warfare, most notably conflicts in which the opposing combatants are not the regular military forces of nation-states. This term is frequently used to describe what is also called guerrilla warfare, insurgency, counterinsurgency, rebellion, terrorism, and counterterrorism.

The term’s popularity dates back to Andrew Mack’s 1975 article, “Why Great Nations Lose Small Wars”, in *World Politics*, where “*asymmetric*” simply refers to a significant disparity in power between opposing actors in a conflict. “*Power*”, in this sense, is broadly understood to mean material strength, such as a large army, advanced weaponry, and a developed economy. At the time, Mack’s analysis was largely ignored, but at the end of the Cold War, it sparked renewed interest among academics. By the late 1990s, new research based on Mack’s work began to emerge; after 2004, the U.S. military again began prioritizing responses to the challenges posed by asymmetric warfare.⁵

Since 2004, the discussion of asymmetric warfare has become more complex due to the tendency of academic and military officials to use the term in different ways, as well as its close association with guerrilla warfare, insurgency, terrorism, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism.

Academic authors tend to focus on explaining two key aspects of asymmetric conflict. First, if “*power*” determines victory, there must be reasons why weaker actors might choose to fight more powerful actors. Key explanations include:

- ❖ Weaker actors may possess covert weapons.
- ❖ The weaker party may have powerful allies.
- ❖ The more powerful actors are unable to make their threats credible.

⁴ James A. Russell (2004), “Asymmetrical Warfare: Today's Challenge to U.S. Military Power”, *Naval War College Review*, 57(1), pp. 1-4.

⁵ Andrew Mack (1975), “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict”, *World Politics*, 27(2), p. 175.

- ❖ The more powerful party's demands are excessive.
- ❖ The weaker party must consider its regional rivals when responding to threats from more powerful actors.

Second, if “*power*”, as we generally understand it, leads to victory in war, there must be an explanation for why the “*weaker*” party can defeat the “*stronger*” party. Key explanations include:⁶

- ❖ Strategic interaction.
- ❖ The weaker party's willingness to suffer more or bear higher costs.
- ❖ External support for the weaker party.
- ❖ The more powerful actors' reluctance to escalate violence.
- ❖ Internal group dynamics.
- ❖ The more powerful party's exaggeration of its war aims. The unequal parties' attitudes toward time develop.

Asymmetric conflicts include interstate conflicts and civil wars, and for the past two centuries, the stronger parties have generally prevailed in these conflicts. However, since 1950, the weaker parties have won most asymmetric conflicts.⁷

Asymmetric warfare is the attempt by the weaker party to outflank the enemy by exploiting its weaknesses and relying on methods entirely different from anticipated operations. Asymmetry means employing the power of psychological warfare, with its accompanying shock and sense of helplessness, to seize the initiative, freedom of movement, and will. This is achieved through innovative means, unconventional tactics, and weapons and technologies developed by thinking about the unexpected and the seemingly illogical, and then applying them at every level of warfare, from strategy to planning.

1.2. The Evolution of the Term “Asymmetric Warfare” in International Relations

The roots of this term trace back to the late 1970s when Andrew Mark, in a significant article, raised several questions about why the mighty United States was defeated by a small country (like Vietnam), despite its limited size, modest resources, and reliance on guerrilla warfare

⁶ Michael A. Allen & Benjamin O. Fordham (2011), “From Melos to Baghdad: Explaining Resistance to Militarized Challenges from More Powerful States”, *International Studies Quarterly*, 55(4), pp. 1025-1045.

⁷ Uri Resnick (2013), *Dynamics of Asymmetric Territorial Conflict: The Evolution of Patience*, UK: Palgrave-Macmillan, p. 287.

tactics. Around the same time, or nearly so, many American military strategists and military strategists (including William S. Lind and Colonel Keith Nightingale) posed similar important questions. All of this led to the development of the term, which describes modern, unconventional, and asymmetric warfare techniques. This has become, somewhat loosely, called “*Fourth-Generation Warfare*” (4GW), especially when imbued with political connotations stemming from the ideas of former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in the form of the strategy known as “*creative chaos*”. This strategy emerged from the work of American scholars on the repercussions of chaos and the potential for exploiting it to maximize the role of the United States in controlling the internal affairs of weak and rogue states, thus enabling it to act effectively as the “*world’s policeman*”.⁸

This role was further amplified by its reliance on a purely American claim that the United States must bear the responsibility of combating terrorism globally within a planned strategy. Based on this claim, America sought to emphasize its commitment to spreading democracy, particularly in the Middle East, a region it claims is severely lacking in democracy, being ruled by oppressive dictatorships. This, it argues, makes them “*societies of fear*”, as described by the Jewish theorist Sharansky, in contrast to the “*free societies*” represented by democratic states, foremost among them, America, as it claims.⁹

In this context, it becomes necessary for the United States to employ all means, both legitimate and illegitimate, to implement its purported convictions and policies. This includes fomenting sectarian, religious, and ethnic strife, which ultimately aims to reshape the Middle East according to a malicious colonial scheme: the “*Greater Middle East Project*”. This project was conceived as a continuation of the colonial partition plan adopted by the Sykes-Picot Agreement. This term remains broad in its usage and definition to this day. It is characterized by flexible boundaries and a lack of precision, which necessitates further examination of its components, characteristics, and how it differs from other types of warfare. For example, it is synonymous with other terms, most notably “*Fourth Generation Warfare (GW4)*” and “*Low-Intensity Conflict*”, among others. Furthermore, the term is marked by considerable ambiguity and interpretation. In professional military and political usage, it encompasses a wide range of

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ivan Arreguín-Toft (2001), “How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict”, *International Security*, 26(1), p. 101.

meanings, some very general, others limited to a specific type of warfare, while still others see it as having no connection whatsoever to the term.¹⁰

Asymmetric warfare works to neutralize the stronger opponent's advantage and relies on indirect methods to achieve its goal. There are undoubtedly many definitions and opinions regarding the meaning of the terms “*asymmetry*”, “*asymmetric warfare*”, “*asymmetric tactics*”, and “*asymmetric options*” within international institutions, militaries, and governments in the contemporary world. The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) defines asymmetric warfare as the use of innovative strategies, tactics, and technologies by a weaker state or sub-state adversary to circumvent the strengths and exploit the potential weaknesses of larger and more technologically superior opponents. This includes:

1. The selective use of weapons or military resources by a sub-state state or group to confront, deter, or potentially defeat a numerically or technologically superior power.
2. The use of diplomatic and other non-military resources or tactics by a sub-state state or group to discourage or constrain military operations by a superior power.

Paul Mann explains that the asymmetric threat is a relatively new term used to describe the weapons and tactics employed by relatively weak adversaries to circumvent the technological dominance of states. Their primary objective is not territorial conquest, nor do they pose a threat to sovereignty. Their objective is not to weaken their adversaries' will and ability to utilize superior conventional military capabilities and effectively intervene in regional conflicts.

Asymmetric threats encompass a full spectrum of disproportionate intimidation that states may face, ranging from international civil disobedience and organized crime to low-intensity military conflicts. These threats range from cyber warfare to the use of weapons of mass destruction, as well as national destabilization resulting from mass migration.

Asymmetric warfare, in general, is unconventional warfare centered on society, waged between a militarily superior power and a weaker one. The parties involved differ in the type, mechanism, and quantity of weaponry, and exhibit disparities in military and strategic power. Often, one party is not a state actor; it is a war between a state or a group of states and a state.¹¹

Therefore, we can say that asymmetric warfare, in its theory, is based on achieving the goal of state collapse using innovative ideas built upon continuous developments in the science of

¹⁰ Ghada Mohamed Amer (2020), “The Evolution of International Conflict in Light of Technological Advancements and the Emergence of Asymmetric Warfare: Unconventional Warfare”, *Journal of Strategic and Military Studies*, 8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

warfare, which has expanded in all directions as a result of scientific advancements in military combat systems. While the objective of symmetric warfare is to defeat the adversary, thereby depriving them of power and facilitating their occupation through the use of conventional military force, asymmetric warfare pursues the same objective but with different tools and methods to achieve the same results at a lower cost and in less time. It forces the opposing state to submit to the will of the other side by transforming the targeted state into a helpless and exhausted entity over time and through successive concentrated strikes, leading to the erosion of its internal system.¹²

In asymmetric warfare, one side possesses a technological advantage that can even surpass the enemy's numerical superiority. Training, tactics, and technology can be decisive, enabling a smaller force to overcome a much larger one. If the inferior power is in a defensive posture, i.e., under attack or occupation, it becomes possible to employ unconventional tactics, such as hit-and-run and selective warfare, to exploit the weaknesses of the superior power. This serves as an effective means of harassment without violating the laws of war.¹³

In his classification of asymmetry, Kenneth McKenzie identified six main types of potential asymmetric threats: nuclear, chemical, biological, information operations, operational concepts, and terrorism. From the United States' perspective, asymmetric threats have been defined as attacks with weapons of mass destruction, regional military threats, and asymmetric threats in which states and non-state adversaries avoid direct engagement but develop strategies, tactics, and weapons to diminish a state's strengths and exploit its weaknesses. In the postmodern era of warfare, the nature and character of war are changing due to technological, social, and cultural advancements. Simultaneously, it has been observed that warfare has begun to be dominated by unconventional tactics, and war and conflict have shifted from a state-centric approach to one where the state's intelligence apparatus is no longer the sole driver of aggression. Thus, postmodern warfare is characterized by two entirely different philosophies: the first relies on technological advancement and is state-centric, while the second relies on the use of unconventional tools and tactics, and is synonymous with non-state actors.¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Bruce W. Bennett & Christopher P. Twomey & Gregory F. Treverton (1999), *What Are Asymmetric Strategies?*, Washington, D.C.: RAND, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ghada Mohamed Amer (2020), "The Evolution of International Conflict in Light of Technological Advancements and the Emergence of Asymmetric Warfare: Unconventional Warfare".

1.3. Tools of Asymmetric Warfare

Asymmetric warfare relies on several elements in its management, some shared with other types of warfare, and others specific to its relatively modern nature. The most important elements can be summarized as follows:¹⁵

- Extensive use of media and communication, and heavy reliance on them for arms procurement and control.
- Reliance on modern technologies, as information and data are among the most important weapons exploited by non-state actors to communicate and achieve major strategic objectives in the conflict.
- Asymmetric warfare places great emphasis on intelligence gathering and information collection due to their increased importance in direct military confrontations, especially as the objective of war shifts to destroying the enemy's fighting spirit.
- It also involves attacking the social fabric and popular culture within the opposing state.
- The use of psychological warfare alongside the direct use of weapons, through spreading rumors, downplaying enemy victories, and exaggerating the victories of armed organizations.

1.4. Characteristics of Asymmetric Warfare

Based on the text of the Pentagon's assessment report, the features and characteristics of asymmetric warfare can be summarized as follows:¹⁶

- There is no battlefield where combatants face each other directly, either head-on or by flanking maneuvers.
- Weapons are often not identical, even if their power levels differ.
- There is no direct correlation between action and reaction on the shifting battlefield.

¹⁵ Robert R. Tomes (2004), "Relearning Counterinsurgency Warfare", *Parameters*, 34(1), pp. 15-28.

¹⁶ Thazha Varkey Paul (1994), *Asymmetric Conflicts: War Initiation by Weaker Powers*, New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 30.

- This necessitates rapid mobilization, movement, surprise attacks, and reliance on tactics of surprise, which are more crucial in asymmetric warfare than in other types of warfare.
- This type of warfare is open to the highest levels of risk because it has nothing to lose, and the highest and lowest risks are equally acceptable.
- This type of warfare combines physical and psychological elements, which is what best serves its asymmetric tactics.
- This type of war demands that soldiers and followers possess high morale, a willingness to face the greatest risks, a strong will, good organization, and patience in enduring hardship.
- Asymmetric warfare is a protracted conflict; those who wage it must have the stamina to achieve their objectives.

2. Iran's Tools in Its Asymmetric War

Given the previous definitions of the concept of asymmetric warfare, we find that, due to the immense military capabilities of the United States, any conflict involving this country will, by definition, be asymmetrical in nature, as was evident in the recent American aggression against Iran.¹⁷

Iran has emerged as a notable example of applying the principles of “*asymmetric warfare*”, successfully narrowing the power gap between itself and militarily superior adversaries, most notably the United States.

- First: The philosophy of fighting instead of an arms race: Instead of engaging in a costly traditional race to develop massive armies or highly advanced weaponry, Iran adopted a different approach: How can strategic influence be achieved with limited resources? This philosophy is based on exhausting the enemy and complicating its calculations, rather than confronting it directly on a conventional battlefield.
- Second: Expanding the arena of conflict through alliances with regional proxies: One of the most prominent features of the Iranian strategy is its reliance on proxies in various regions, such as the Houthi movement in Yemen, which controls the Bab

¹⁷ Bilal Muhammad Al-Zubaidi (2026), *Asymmetric Warfare between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Logic of Power versus the Strategy of Attrition*, Al-Bayan Center for Studies and Planning.

el-Mandeb Strait, the third most important strait in the world, and Hezbollah in Lebanon, which serves as a forward position to confront Israel, or at least, from our perspective, to weaken it. This approach allows Iran to exert influence on multiple fronts without engaging in direct warfare, and it provides Iran with strategic depth that makes it difficult for its adversaries to contain or decisively target it.¹⁸

- Third: Missiles as a Low-Cost Deterrent: Iran has invested heavily in developing a diverse missile arsenal that combines range and accuracy. These missiles represent an effective means of creating a balance of deterrence, as they can be used to strike vital targets at a much lower cost than defending against them. This is the essence of asymmetric warfare: forcing the enemy to expend greater resources to counter a less costly threat.
- Fourth: Drones and the “*Saturation*” Tactic: With the advancement of drone technology, Iran recognized their importance early on. Drones offer surveillance and attack capabilities at a low cost and can be used in large numbers to overwhelm air defense systems. This tactic, known as “*saturation*”, presents the enemy with a difficult dilemma: Should they expend expensive missiles to intercept inexpensive targets?
- Fifth: Targeting Sensitive Points Instead of All-Out Confrontation: Iran focuses on striking high-impact targets, such as economic infrastructure or vital waterways. This type of targeting does not aim to achieve a conventional military victory, but rather to create an economic or political shock that puts pressure on the enemy indirectly.
- Sixth: The Blending of Military and Non-Military Forces: Asymmetric warfare is not limited to weapons; it also encompasses media warfare, psychological pressure, and cyber operations. Iran has worked to develop this blend, making the conflict multidimensional and difficult to resolve with conventional military means alone. In conclusion, Iran’s experience in asymmetric warfare does not signify overall military superiority but rather reflects an ability to manage conflict intelligently and at a lower cost. Iran has succeeded in transforming its weaknesses into relative strengths, forcing its adversaries to reconsider the nature of modern warfare. In an

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

increasingly complex and interconnected world, this model appears likely to remain a factor in power equations for years to come.

Alan Eyre, a former State Department expert on Iran and a professor at the Middle East Institute, said, “*This conflict shows that Iran can win without achieving a true victory.*” He added, “*The American narrative is that everything is under control, but incidents and events like Iran’s downing of the two American drones contradict that narrative.*”¹⁹

Instead of confronting the United States and Israel directly, Iran has adopted a strategy of asymmetric warfare, targeting Gulf states, radar installations, and vital air defense facilities, and restricting oil tanker traffic through the Strait of Hormuz.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has been using these same tactics for years, including in Iraq, where it has armed groups with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) to kill thousands of American soldiers.

Although the air campaign has destroyed Iranian missile bases and mobile launchers, Tehran remains capable of launching dozens of missiles and drones daily, prolonging the conflict, increasing the economic costs for the oil-exporting Gulf states and the United States, and enabling it to continue fighting, according to The Wall Street Journal.

In a strategic analysis of the Iranian conflict with the United States and Israel, analysts who share our view believe that Tehran is waging an “*asymmetric war*”, leveraging its geographic location and limited missile capabilities to transform the military confrontation into an “*economic and energy war*” affecting the entire world.

Iran is exploiting its control of the Strait of Hormuz and its ability to strike oil tankers to compel major global powers—such as the European Union, China, India, and Japan—to pressure it to halt attacks on its territory. This strategy, in our view, aims to “*rewrite the rules of engagement*” with Washington and Tel Aviv.²⁰

The past period has witnessed simultaneous security incidents targeting energy infrastructure and civilian facilities. In Qatar, Qatar Energy announced a halt to liquefied natural gas production due to a military attack on its facilities in Ras Laffan and Mesaieed. In Saudi Arabia, two drones targeting the Ras Tanura refinery were intercepted, and the refinery was shut down

¹⁹ Saleh bin Sanidah Al-Otaibi (2026), *An Analytical Reading of the American-Israeli War on Iran*, Riyadh: Gulf Research Center, s. 66.

²⁰ Hamdi Mahmoud (2026), *The American-Israeli War on Iran: A Strategic Conflict and Shifts in Regional and International Balances*, Arab Democratic Center.

as a precaution. Debris fell on the Mina Al-Ahmadi refinery in Kuwait, and an oil tanker was targeted northwest of the Sultan Qaboos port in Oman.²¹

This led to a 50% increase in European gas prices, while oil prices surged amid concerns about continued disruption to shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 20% of the world's oil supply passes.

Iran's attacks on Gulf energy resources are of exceptional importance given the region's economic weight. Although Iran produces only about 3.3 million barrels per day (3% of global production), its influence far exceeds its output due to its geographical location on the Strait of Hormuz, through which most oil exports from the Gulf states pass to reach China, India, and Japan.

Hassan al-Hassan, a Middle East policy expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said, "*Iran has expanded its target bank to include civilian infrastructure in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, including oil and gas facilities and power plants, in an attempt to exert political and economic pressure on the region and the world.*"

He explained that "*Through this escalation, Tehran seeks to make the global economy bear the cost of the confrontation by impacting energy security and gas and oil supplies, especially for European and Asian countries that rely on Gulf exports.*"

The situation on the ground underscores its gravity. The Iranian news agency Tasnim reported that a ship attempting to illegally transit the Strait of Hormuz was targeted and sunk. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard also claimed that the US-allied fuel tanker Athena Nova caught fire after being struck by two drones.

Researcher Ali al-Dhahab emphasizes that Iran's strategy relies on calculations based on maneuvering and resistance within flexible parameters. He adds that "*Iran has learned harsh lessons, particularly from the strikes it suffered in June of last year*". He explains that Iran is now demonstrating considerable flexibility in dealing with threats in the Gulf region, both on land and at sea.

We also see this as the second phase of a systematic Iranian escalation, given that the concept of exerting pressure through the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz is not new to Iranian political discourse; it dates back decades, including the Iran-Iraq War.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 44-47.

Therefore, we can say that Iran is waging a war with calculated objectives, using its strategic geographical location and limited military capabilities to achieve the maximum possible impact. It is turning the unequal military confrontation into a comprehensive economic war that forces the major international powers to exert pressure to stop the attacks on its territory and to reformulate the rules of engagement with the United States and Israel by expanding the circle of influence. It is possible that the ultimate goal is to reach a comprehensive political settlement that includes the files of the nuclear program, missiles, and regional influence.²²

3. An Assessment of the Iranian Strategy

The three main belligerents—the United States and Israel on one side, and Iran on the other—have achieved a number of gains and suffered a number of setbacks, but none have reached the conclusion that the anticipated benefits no longer justify the costs involved.

Because it is clear that the ongoing negotiations between the United States and Iran, which the US has repeatedly exaggerated, have not made significant progress, the president issued explicit threats of escalation to the Iranian leadership. He stated that unless an agreement is reached (meaning an agreement based on US demands), the coming weeks will witness an escalation of US attacks on Iran and the complete destruction of all its energy infrastructure.

This attempt to create an impression of victory was previously tried by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a speech on March 31, after he likely realized that his US partner in the war, and the one with the upper hand, was close to ending it. Netanyahu had already declared victory in his speech on the twentieth anniversary of the war, but his latest claim that he had succeeded in destroying Iran and its nuclear and military capabilities was particularly striking. It is noteworthy that Netanyahu, who has consistently maintained that the war is existential, declared in his victory speech that Iran no longer poses an existential threat to Israel.

As with all aspects of this war, from its justifications and objectives to its conduct, it was impossible to be certain that it would actually end within two or three weeks. However, the declarations of victory in Washington and Tel Aviv inevitably raise crucial questions about what the three main parties to the war—the United States, Israel, and Iran—have achieved and what they have failed to achieve thus far. They also raise further questions about the conditions that must be met, or lack thereof, to justify ending the war, or its continuation in a form different from that which it has taken since the outbreak of hostilities on February 28th.²³

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

3.1. Iran's Achievements and Failures

Iran demonstrated remarkable political resilience in the face of the massive attacks it endured, particularly during the initial weeks of the war. The Iranian regime maintained its existence and cohesion, working to contain the blows to its leadership institutions without any tangible decline in the manifestations of governance and sovereignty across the country. This resilience and rapid recovery are perhaps among the Iranian regime's most significant achievements to date.

The regime successfully employed the tools of asymmetric warfare, both in the extensive use of missiles, especially cluster and multi-warhead missiles, and in the selective closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Because the selective closure of the strait was a consequence of the war itself, and given its significant impact on the global economy, it provided the Iranian negotiator with another bargaining chip. However, while the closure of Hormuz became a political burden for the United States, and particularly for Washington's relations with its European allies, it likely benefited the US economically, as oil prices rose and demand for American oil increased. On the other hand, it also led to higher gasoline and energy prices for American consumers.

Clearly, Iranian-backed armed groups succeeded in mobilizing and deploying a deterrent force against Iranian armed opposition groups, particularly Kurdish groups on the western side of the border with Iraq. Reports have circulated about Israeli contacts with some of these groups for over a year prior to the outbreak of war.

Despite the long-standing accusations leveled against the Islamic Republic of pursuing sectarian policies to expand its regional influence and of disregarding the stability of neighboring countries, the Iranians successfully utilized their allies in Lebanon and Iraq to bolster their response to the war. Hezbollah posed a threat to Israel's security from the early days of the conflict, while Iraqi factions loyal to Iran were used to threaten American positions in Iraq, as well as the positions of Iranian Kurdish opposition forces and key Iraqi Kurdish leaders accused of providing protection to Iranian Kurds. Iraqi factions are also believed to have participated in attacks on Gulf states, particularly Kuwait.²⁴

However, Iran's failures in managing the war were no less significant.

²⁴ Fazal Khaliq (2026), "Strategic Resilience, Miscalculation, and Geopolitical Realignment: The 2026 US-Israel-Iran", Erişim Tarihi: 12.06.2026, Erişim Adresi: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/404040249_Strategic_Resilience_Miscalculation_and_Geopolitical_Realignment_The_2026_US-Israel-Iran.

What Iran sought to achieve by expanding the war to the Gulf states and Iraq was undoubtedly to increase the war's costs, particularly for the United States, which bore responsibility for initiating the war and was considered a major power friendly to the Gulf states. However, aside from disrupting navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately one-fifth of the world's oil supply passes, along with a significant portion of fertilizers and other industrial chemicals, neither the United States nor Israel appeared to care much about the damage inflicted on the Gulf states. The Iranians calculated that the threat of targeting civilian infrastructure in the Gulf states, should similar infrastructure in Iran be targeted, would deter the U.S./Israeli war effort. But the continued attacks on Iranian industrial and research sites may indicate that the Israelis and Americans actually welcome the escalating hostility between Iran and its Arab neighbors.²⁵

On both the military and security levels, Iran suffered multifaceted failures.

Following the twelve-day war, Iran was supposed to modernize its air defense systems and address the shortcomings that had exposed their inability to counter Israeli air attacks throughout the war. However, it appears that Iran's efforts in this area, regardless of the systems' origin, did not provide the necessary protection against the American/Israeli attacks, which targeted not only Tehran but various parts of the country, including highly sensitive military and economic sites. Iran was only able to hit two or three American aircraft in the fifth week of the war, perhaps indicating technical and intelligence support provided to the Iranians in the preceding weeks by Russia, China, and North Korea. It remains unclear, however, whether these successes are sustainable and whether the extent of the repair or modernization of Iran's air defenses covers the entire country.²⁶

From a security perspective, the price of Iran's failure has been high. The war has thus far demonstrated that foreign intelligence penetration of Iran reaches various levels of the government and permeates broad areas of Iranian life. All of Iran's key political and military leaders have been assassinated due to security failures, whether through agents or breaches of surveillance and communication systems. The war has also revealed that the Americans and Israelis had prepared a target bank of thousands of Iranian military, industrial, and economic sites throughout the country.²⁷

²⁵ Hamdi Mahmoud (2026), "The American-Israeli War on Iran: A Strategic Conflict and Shifts in Regional and International Balances".

²⁶ Ali Bakir (2026), "The US-Israeli War on Iran: Context of Escalation and Trajectories of the Conflict", *Lubab for Strategic Studies*, 30, pp. 72-98.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

4. The Future of the Conflict

The question this phase of the war poses is whether the scale of its achievements and failures will lead each of the three parties involved to request, or even favor, a ceasefire. In other words, is it now possible for the U.S. administration, or perhaps even the Israeli government, to believe it has achieved sufficient gains to declare an end to the war, or that the war, on the other hand, has inflicted enough casualties on Iran to warrant some form of end, even if that end does not fully align with Iran's core demands?

On April 3, former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, sometimes considered a figure acceptable to the West in Iran, published an article in the American magazine *Foreign Affairs*. In his article, Zarif argued that Iran now holds the upper hand in the confrontation and that the Iranian leadership should therefore move toward ending the war to avoid further losses of life and infrastructure. Zarif also proposed a framework for a ceasefire that would address the demands of the various parties involved, without adding anything to the nuclear agreement he had previously signed with the Obama administration. However, it is likely that Zarif's article does not reflect the position of the Iranian leadership, nor does it appear that he has secured the approval of either the Iranians or the Americans for his proposed initial agreement.

On the other hand, what can be inferred from President Trump's recent speech—despite the inherent difficulty in interpreting the president's statements—is that Washington now links a definitive end to the war to reaching a comprehensive agreement with the Iranians on all outstanding issues. There are indications that the president has come to realize the difficulty of regime change or overthrow in Iran, and that he instead wants to reach an agreement with the Iranians that addresses American demands regarding the elimination of highly enriched uranium, limiting the range of Iranian missiles, and the Iranians abandoning their regional allies. But the Israelis show no interest in an agreement, believing that their partnership with the United States in the war provides an unprecedented opportunity to continue confronting the Iranian regime until the Islamic Republic is completely overthrown or brought to the brink of collapse.²⁸

The problem is that the war, despite the immense destruction it has caused, has only emboldened the Iranians. The Iranians believe that their resilience and the cohesion of their regime necessitate a firmer stance in negotiations, not capitulation to American demands. This explains the extreme slowness of the indirect negotiations, which are being conducted through

²⁸ *Ibid.*

intermediaries. Moreover, in response to the high ceiling of American demands, the Iranians have added to their position on the nuclear issue other demands, including the complete lifting of sanctions, sovereignty over the Strait of Hormuz, guarantees of a permanent cessation of hostilities, an end to the war on the Lebanese front, and the withdrawal of American forces from the region.

In a highly complex, multifaceted, and far-reaching conflict, the possibility of reaching an agreement should not be entirely ruled out, especially if the parties recognize the catastrophic consequences of continuing the war and demonstrate a willingness to compromise on their demands. On March 31, the Qatari Foreign Ministry announced its readiness to assist in the Iranian-American negotiations. Several reports have also emerged regarding the contributions of some of Iran's neighboring countries in pushing the warring parties toward negotiations.²⁹

Certainly, the window of opportunity for reaching an agreement is narrow. If the two sides fail to bridge their differences within a few days, the pace of the conflict is heading toward escalation, including the possibility of a limited American invasion of Iran.³⁰

There is no doubt that the war, at least on the American side, has deteriorated from a mere few days to weeks, almost automatically, due to grave miscalculations by the U.S. and Israel regarding the Iranian position and Iran's capacity to withstand and retaliate. Therefore, if an agreement proves impossible, perhaps during the sixth week of the war, the American administration might proceed with its threats to target Iran's civilian infrastructure and "*return it to the Stone Age*", as President Trump put it. However, American considerations, such as rising energy prices, are preventing this, as it would lead to price hikes in the U.S. and potentially fuel public discontent with the Trump administration and the Republican Party.

There is also another aspect of war that seems to be overlooked. Even if the war were to stop with an agreement, or a half-agreement, or simply a ceasefire, and the Israelis were to adhere to the American position on the Iranian front, it is certain that the Israelis will not stop the war on Hezbollah, and there is no indication that they are planning to withdraw soon from their positions of incursion into southern Lebanon.

Conclusion

In conclusion, asymmetric warfare stands out as one of the most complex challenges facing armies and states in the modern era. Confrontations in this type of warfare transcend the

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

traditional concept of conventional warfare between regular armies. It involves a side possessing military and technological superiority against an adversary employing unconventional tactics, such as guerrilla warfare, surprise attacks, and media propaganda, making a swift victory difficult. Historical and contemporary experience has demonstrated that military superiority alone is insufficient to achieve victory in this type of conflict. A deep understanding of the political, cultural, and social dimensions is required, along with the use of flexible strategies adapted to the nature of asymmetric warfare.

The current war between Iran and the United States and its ally Israel has revealed a well-known strategic paradox in military studies: military superiority does not always translate into swift political gains. Experience has shown that possessing technological or air superiority does not necessarily guarantee a rapid strategic victory, especially in conflicts characterized by the interplay of multiple regional and international factors. This reality reflects what some strategic studies scholars call the dilemma of inconclusive military superiority, where military force can achieve significant operational successes without necessarily leading to the ultimate political objectives of the war.

Ultimately, a geostrategic reading of this war reveals it as a true test of the balance of power in the Middle East. The outcome of this conflict will not be determined solely by direct military factors, but will also be influenced by a wide range of political, economic, and geopolitical considerations. While the military operations began with specific objectives related to weakening Iran's strategic capabilities, the medium-term trajectory of this war has remained contingent on the ability of the parties involved to manage the delicate balance between military power and political calculations. From this perspective, it can be argued that the war on Iran is not merely a circumstantial military confrontation, but rather a relative Iranian success in deterring Israeli and American aggression. Iran has demonstrated a profound strategic understanding of the characteristics and features of asymmetric warfare, providing us, to date, with the most prominent and successful model of asymmetric warfare. Furthermore, it constitutes part of a broader strategic dynamic that may contribute to reshaping the power equations in the Middle East and redefining certain aspects of the international order in the coming years.

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