How does the demonstrated resilience of Iran's missile infrastructure against US kinetic strikes reconfigure regional deterrence architectures and incentivize asymmetric escalation among non-state actors in the Levant?

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Executive Summary

The demonstrated resilience of Iran's missile infrastructure against US kinetic strikes has reconfigured regional deterrence architectures by shifting the strategic reality towards a model of distributed asymmetric deterrence and endurance, rather than conventional state-level capabilities. Evidence suggests this resilience incentivizes asymmetric escalation among non-state actors in the Levant, as it validates their ability to impose continuous costs, outlast adversary political will, and exploit the economic vulnerabilities of advanced air defense systems.

Key Findings

Regional Deterrence Relies on Distributed Asymmetric Endurance

Regional deterrence architecture in the post-2025 Middle East is defined by **distributed proxy denial** and **asymmetric endurance**, moving away from traditional state-level second-strike capabilities or integrated air defense networks [4, 6]. Iran's strategic center of gravity is a decentralized network of non-state actors designed to survive decapitation strikes and outlast adversary political will [4]. This framework is reinforced by the "cost-exchange dilemma," where high-value interceptors are economically unsustainable against saturation attacks of low-cost drones and short-range missiles [8]. While Iran's state-level missile infrastructure demonstrated resilience, retaining an estimated 70% to 75% of its pre-war launchers and missiles according to CIA assessments, the core deterrence mechanism has shifted to this distributed model [3, 5, 10]. This network, spanning Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Gaza, functions even after the elimination of senior Iranian leadership, such as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in February 2026 [6, 9]. By leveraging proxies like Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Kataib Hezbollah, Iran exploits the "simultaneity problem" facing American forces, stretching their resources across multiple

theaters [4, 6].

US Kinetic Strikes Degraded Launch Capacity but Confirmed Asymmetric Endurance

US kinetic strikes, including Operation Epic Fury, significantly degraded Iran's operational missile launch capacity and reduced its launch tempo, yet Iran's rapid repair and dispersal of facilities confirm asymmetric endurance was always the intended strategic equilibrium [1, 3, 10]. JINSA reported that Operation Epic Fury destroyed approximately 75% of Iran's launch capacity and reduced launches by 90% [3]. However, a classified CIA document prior to May 2026 indicates Iran retained about 75% of its pre-war launchers and 70% of its missiles, challenging optimistic statements about the strikes' overall effectiveness in neutralizing Iran's long-term arsenal [10]. This resilience exposes the futility of relying on conventional kinetic strikes to impose decisive strategic costs, as Tehran's strategy was explicitly designed to endure attacks longer than adversaries could sustain them [1, 4]. The removal of conventional deterrents does not create compliance but instead incentivizes indefinite asymmetric conflict below the threshold of direct confrontation [4].

Resilient Stockpiles Trigger a Defense Cost-Exchange Dilemma

Iran's resilient underground missile stockpiles, quickly repaired and reopened after extensive US and Israeli kinetic strikes, directly trigger a critical "cost-exchange dilemma" for modern layered air defense systems [1, 8, 10]. High-value interceptors like Patriot, THAAD, and Iron Dome, costing hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars each, are forced to engage low-cost drones and short-range missiles that cost a fraction of the price [8]. This exchange rate is economically unsustainable at scale, as saturation attacks deplete defensive inventories faster than they can be replenished [8]. For instance, a July 2025 JINSA report estimated Iran's missile strikes during the June 2025 war cost $1.1 billion to $6.6 billion, while US and Israeli interceptors cost $1.48 billion to $1.58 billion [13]. A December 2025 CSIS analysis noted the US used 150 THAAD interceptors and 80 Standard Missile-3s during the June 2025 conflict, calculating that expending 150 THAAD missiles would leave only 96 interceptors to restock two batteries, leaving zero reserve interceptors [12, 14]. This economic vulnerability mechanistically drives Levantine non-state actors to escalate drone and rocket barrages as a rational force multiplier within Iran's distributed deterrence architecture [4, 8].

Prior Strikes Catalyze Decentralized Proxy Retaliation

Historical US and Israeli kinetic campaigns demonstrate that striking entrenched missile networks and proxy command structures catalyzes decentralized retaliatory cycles rather than suppressing non-state actor escalation [4]. The 2003 destruction of Saddam Hussein's conventional army taught Iran that traditional deterrence is futile, prompting a strategic pivot to a distributed proxy network designed to survive decapitation strikes [4]. Incidents between 2019 and 2025, including the drone and missile attack on Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq facility, Hezbollah missile barrages displacing over 100,000 Israelis, and the October 7 Hamas attack, proved this proxy network can impose severe costs without requiring a nuclear weapon [4]. Current infrastructure resilience actively catalyzes decentralized retaliatory cycles by ensuring Iran retains the capacity to sustain an attrition campaign, even if senior leadership is eliminated [1, 6, 10].

Resilience Incentivizes Autonomous Escalation by Non-State Actors

The visible survivability of Iran's missile infrastructure and distributed proxy network directly incentivizes asymmetric escalation by demonstrating that the overarching deterrence architecture can endure US kinetic strikes, allowing non-state actors to bypass traditional thresholds [4]. Groups like Hezbollah, Kataib Hezbollah, and the Houthis operate within a decentralized framework explicitly designed to function independently if nodes are lost [4]. For example, the Houthi movement resumed missile and drone attacks on US and Israeli-flagged ships within hours of Operation Epic Fury on February 28, 2026, utilizing pre-positioned responses without direct command from Tehran [4]. Similarly, Kataib Hezbollah immediately pledged to attack US bases in Iraq following a strike on its headquarters [4]. Hezbollah actively rebuilt military infrastructure south of the Litani River prior to February 2026 strikes and continues to attack Israel [4]. These groups escalate based on the calculated resilience of the distributed network itself, which guarantees they can sustain an enduring attrition campaign and impose costs on adversaries regardless of the status of Iran's central infrastructure or senior leadership [1, 4, 6]. While the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) provides funding, training, and strategic guidance, proxy groups possess "autonomous decision-making" capabilities [6, 11].

Implications

The demonstrated resilience of Iran's missile infrastructure and its distributed proxy

network has profound implications for regional security. It signifies a fundamental shift in deterrence, where conventional kinetic strikes against state assets are increasingly ineffective at achieving compliance or suppressing conflict. Instead, this resilience validates and encourages a strategy of asymmetric endurance, empowering non-state actors to escalate autonomously and continuously impose costs on adversaries. This reconfigures regional deterrence architectures towards a persistent, decentralized threat that exploits economic vulnerabilities in advanced air defense systems. The "cost-exchange dilemma" will likely drive further investment in alternative defense technologies, but the core challenge remains the political will to endure protracted, low-intensity conflict.

Limitations and Caveats

The available research provides limited specific quantitative data on the cost-exchange ratio (in USD) of US/Israeli interceptors versus Iranian/proxy projectiles, beyond general estimates and inventory depletion figures [8, 13, 14]. Furthermore, the research does not contain information on how specific regional states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan) have adjusted their formal deterrence postures or bilateral security agreements, or their specific procurement of counter-drone technologies or underground detection sensors following Iran's demonstrated resilience [7]. There is also no identification of specific named command-and-control protocols directly linking the rapid repair of Iran's underground missile facilities to coordinated escalation decisions by Levantine non-state actors; instead, the connection is described through broader strategic support and decentralized operational autonomy [2, 6, 8].

Sources

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