

# Iran's Retaliation: Choreography, Escalation Management, and the Mirage of "All-Out" War

by [Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Jun 25, 2025

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/antqam-ayran-alsrht-adart-altsyd-wsrab-alhrb-alshamlt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/antqam-ayran-alsrht-adart-altsyd-wsrab-alhrb-alshamlt)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Eisenstadt \(/experts/michael-eisenstadt\)](/experts/michael-eisenstadt)

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Senior Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.



Brief Analysis

**Fears of an “all-out” war with Iran have been greatly overstated, and they fail to account for the Islamic Republic’s overriding desire to avoid such an outcome and the diverse repertoire it has developed to prevent one.**

Iran’s calibrated response to the U.S. strike on three of its nuclear facilities showed that while it would not be cowed, it would respond in a manner intended to avoid further escalation. On June 23, Tehran launched **fourteen** (<https://www.axios.com/2025/06/23/iran-retaliation-trump-israel-war>) missiles at al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar (to match the fourteen bombs dropped by seven American B-2s on June 21) just hours before its war with Israel was halted by a ceasefire. Iranian officials also **downplayed** (<https://www.presstv.co.uk/Detail/2025/06/22/750024/iran-condemns-illegal-us-assault-nuclear-sites-vows-legal-measures>) the damage caused by Saturday’s U.S. strike (to deflect pressures for an even stronger response), provided advance notice to **Qatar** (<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2025/06/23/world/iran-trump-israel-news/4a08b02a-0595-5304-9441-4839a82ffd81?smid=url-share>) and the **United States** (<https://x.com/TrumpDailyPosts/status/1937239055231779033/photo/1>) of their impending attack (to allow defensive preparations to be taken), and launched a relatively small number of missiles (to avoid overwhelming defenses). Their choice of target was telling as well: an air base, which by design is hardened against attack, and whose normal complement of U.S. military aircraft had departed weeks prior.

This episode demonstrates how, in the course of its often lethal forty-six-year conflict with the United States, Tehran has developed a repertoire of actions to manage escalation and thereby avoid a major conventional war—the core principle guiding its national security strategy since the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988. Other episodes provide additional insights in this regard:

- In September 2019, in response to the first Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign of economic sanctions, Tehran launched a carefully planned drone and cruise missile strike against critical oil facilities in Saudi Arabia. The operation was nonlethal by design—Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reportedly (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-special-rep/special-report-time-to-take-out-our-swords-inside-irans-plot-to-attack-saudi-arabia-idUSKBN1XZ16H/>) approved the strike on the proviso that no civilians or Americans would be killed. Although the attack cut Saudi oil production by half for several weeks, the damaged structures were rapidly repaired. The strike is a prime example of an asymmetric attack that was conducted in such a way as to limit the potential for escalation while producing dramatic strategic effects.
- In January 2020, in response to the U.S. killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, Iran launched sixteen missiles at American targets at Iraq’s al-Asad Air Base. Tehran provided Baghdad with advance notice (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-early-warning/hours-of-forewarning-saved-us-iraqi-lives-from-irans-missile-attack-idUSKBN1ZC218/>) of the attack and likely assumed that this information would be passed on to the Americans; President Trump later (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rw8Dws8Wts>) claimed that Iran also contacted him to pass on this information. In any case, American intelligence provided U.S. personnel with sufficient advance warning (<https://www.afcent.af.mil/News/Article/2139775/american-airmens-accounts-of-iranian-missile-attacks/>) to evacuate or shelter in hardened bunkers. None were killed, though about 100 suffered concussions. Afterward, the United States and Iran signaled their desire to de-escalate via public (<https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/07/politics/rockets-us-airbase-iraq/index.html>) and back-channel (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/swiss-back-channel-helped-defuse-u-s-iran-crisis-11578702290>) communications. To save face, however, Iran claimed (<https://www.memri.org/tv/general-hajizadeh-irgac-aerospace-missile-attack-us-iraq-beginning-revenge-casualties-arab-countries-expel-region-else>) to have inflicted heavy losses. It also subsequently launched a covert campaign to kill former U.S. officials (<https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/member-irans-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-irgc-charged-plot-murder-former-national>) involved in the decision to kill Soleimani—including (<https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-murder-hire-and-related-charges-against-irgc-asset-and-two>) President Trump.
- In the months following Soleimani’s death, Iran’s proxy militias in Iraq slowly ramped up mortar and rocket attacks on U.S. military personnel there. Meanwhile, they dramatically increased improvised explosive device attacks on U.S. logistical convoys operated by Iraqi contractors, in which there was close to zero chance (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ashab-al-kahfs-takeover-convoy-strategy>) of an American being wounded or killed. From mid-2020 to mid-2022, this kind of “performative resistance” was the dominant military activity of these proxies, which enabled them to dramatically claim that they were fighting the U.S. military presence, whereas in fact they were only jeopardizing the lives of other Iraqis. Nonetheless, a continuous trickle of lethal and near-lethal drone and rocket attacks against U.S. personnel continued throughout this timeframe.
- In October 2024, after Iran launched 200 missiles at Israel to avenge the death of Lebanese Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah (among other reasons), the Israeli Air Force took out the engagement radars associated with four S-300 surface-to-air missile sites defending nuclear and missile production facilities around Tehran and one defending petrochemical facilities near Abadan. Yet Tehran eschewed retaliation, despite an attempt that April by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Hossein Salami to create a “new [deterrence] equation” with Israel by announcing (<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/04/14/irgc-chief-says-israeli-attacks-will-prompt-direct-iranian-retaliation-moving-forward>) that “any attack” on the “people, property, or interests” of Iran would elicit “a reciprocal response.” The regime knew it was folly to launch an attack at a time when the IAF could operate over Iran with impunity. Instead, it responded by ramping up (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle->

[east/iran-dramatically-increasing-enrichment-near-bomb-grade-iaea-chief-2024-12-06/#:~:text=In%20the%20report%20to%20member,the%20White%20House%20in%20January.](#))

production of high-enriched uranium. This was not the first time that Tehran had deferred or eschewed military retaliation in order to cut its losses. After the Taliban massacred eleven Iranian diplomats and a journalist at its consulate in Mazar-e Sharif, Afghanistan, in August 1998, Iran mobilized its forces but then stood down, fearing that intervention would produce a quagmire. Instead, it armed Afghanistan's Northern Alliance. Tehran will often back down when firmly challenged in order to avoid a confrontation under unfavorable circumstances, renewing its challenge at a different time and place or by different means.

A caveat: Iranian activities perceived as performative are often not. For example, some observers have claimed that Iran's massive April 2024 drone and missile attack against Israel in retaliation for the killing of Qods Force general Mohammad Reza Zahedi and his staff in Damascus was "performative." Although this operation was thoroughly telegraphed, poorly coordinated, and successfully parried by Israel and its partners, there is no reason to believe it was intended as a symbolic act. Tehran often relishes telling its enemies what it is about to do to inspire fear and demonstrate its control over the terms of engagement. Moreover, it did not need to use 300 drones and missiles to create an aerial spectacle—it could have made quite a show with just a few dozen. To preserve honor and project an image of strength, Tehran needed to avenge the killing of its officers in Damascus, and a large salvo was required to ensure that at least some munitions would penetrate Israel's defenses.

In sum, Iran's repertoire of actions to manage escalation and avoid an "all-out" war may include a mix of the following:

- The calibrated use of force to achieve both lethal and nonlethal effects
- In-kind, tit-for-tat responses to adversary actions to keep the conflict within established bounds
- Tactical flexibility—including a willingness to temporarily back down when confronted by a strong rebuff, while responding by less risky means
- Choreographed actions
- Acts of performative resistance
- Exaggerating achievements to project an image of strength, while downplaying setbacks to tamp down pressures to act
- Public and back-channel communications to clarify intentions and avoid misunderstandings

In this light, fears of an "all-out" war with Iran seem overstated and reflect a misunderstanding of the Islamic Republic's strategy. Indeed, the Trump administration appears to understand this—as seen by its willingness to engage in coercive diplomacy and conduct limited airstrikes against Iran. But addressing this misconception among analysts and the public, better understanding Tehran's unconventional modus operandi, and expanding Washington's own repertoire to manage escalation will be especially important as the United States grapples with the aftermath of the Iran-Israel war and works to dismantle Tehran's nuclear and missile programs in the months and years to come.

*Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute, director of its Military and Security Studies Program, and author of its recent study ["Attacking Iran's Nuclear Program: The Complex Calculus of Preventive Action \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/attacking-irans-nuclear-program-complex-calculus-preventive-action\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/attacking-irans-nuclear-program-complex-calculus-preventive-action)."* ❖

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Back to the Table? Recommendations for Negotiations with Iran](#)

Jun 27, 2025

◆  
Dennis Ross,  
Richard Nephew,  
Farzin Nadimi,  
Patrick Clawson,  
Michael Singh,  
Grant Rumley,  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/back-table-recommendations-negotiations-iran\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [After the "Hammer": Postwar Opportunities and Risks for U.S. Policy in the Middle East](#)

June 30, 2025, starting at 1:00 p.m. EDT (1700 GMT)

◆  
Robert Satloff,  
Mona Yacoubian,  
Richard Nephew

[\(/policy-analysis/after-hammer-postwar-opportunities-and-risks-us-policy-middle-east\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Qais al-Khazali Tries, Fails to Tone Down Militant Bluster](#)

Jun 26, 2025

◆  
Hamdi Malik,  
Michael Knights

[\(/policy-analysis/qais-al-khazali-tries-fails-tone-down-militant-bluster\)](#)

## TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)