

Opinion **Middle East war**

Who is winning the Middle East war?

Iran has taken a beating but it retains the advantages of geography, time and a superior tolerance for pain

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A B1 bomber at RAF Fairford in the UK. For every gung-ho retired US general on television, there is another quiet one shaking his head © Leon Neal/Getty Images

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Published 7 HOURS AGO

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War is the ultimate crash course. People who never knew the difference between an AK-47 and an M4 assault rifle are now versed in the intricacies of air defence systems; those unlucky enough to be close to the action learn to differentiate between an incoming ballistic missile landing on target and its interception.

The first military phase of the US-Israel campaign against Iran — which was pre-planned, highly scripted and methodical in its execution — appears to be coming to a close. Judging by the figures, the operational success of the campaign is indeed stunning. Having established air superiority, it involved hundreds of US and Israeli aircraft, two aircraft carriers, cruise and ballistic missiles and more.

Having been on the receiving end of more than 13,000 strikes in just two weeks, Iran's leadership and infrastructure losses have been staggering. US and Israeli officials offer optimistic figures about how many missiles and launchers have been destroyed on the ground.

So who is winning so far? The man with access to the best intelligence available, Donald Trump, insists that the US and Israel are clearly winning, before bemoaning that the Islamic republic is not caving. Pure metrics and technological supremacy, it turns out, don't tell the whole story about a war's trajectory. Rushing a Marine Expeditionary Unit from Okinawa, moving air defence systems from the Korean peninsula and urging navies from ambivalent if not unfriendly countries to deploy in the Gulf region are not a sign of panic given Washington's massive capabilities. But they are not indicators of sound forecasting and well-thought-through planning either. For every gung-ho retired general on television, there is another quiet one shaking his head.

Reactive defence requires resources and the sustainment burden will be significant and politically controversial. How many ships can be devoted to escorting tankers and will any other nations help? How many aircraft and drones can be kept in the air at all times?

Good strategy is the alignment of ends and means. By that standard, the Iranians haven't done badly. Lacking the ability to defend itself, Tehran has chosen to impose a high cost all around and its focus has been deliberate. Israel has been hit, but it is a less important target at present: with depleted missile capabilities, Iran cannot achieve decisive effect against a better-protected country with a hardened population. Instead, the nearby UAE has borne the brunt of Tehran's retaliation, followed by Kuwait and Bahrain. High on the list has been energy infrastructure, from production and refining to loading and transport.

Saudi Arabia has comparatively been spared, although one-third of the drones fired at the kingdom has targeted the crucial oil site of Shaybah. Above all, Iran's ability to paralyse maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz has defied expectations that the US had gamed this war out. Graphs showing high interception rates and reduced incoming projectiles don't say how many interceptors have been used up or whether Iranian targeting has improved.

Modern interstate warfare is no longer primarily about the frontline, it is about what happens in the rear. Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the latter's valiant defence show how faulty assumptions can deny military victory to the force that is strongest on paper; how no single or specific range of weapons systems can be decisive; how adaptation and innovation give temporary advantage before being matched or overcome by the other side; how social resilience underpins military power.

What will phase two of the war look like? For Israel, the focus will be on the continued destruction of Iran's military infrastructure and greater targeting of its coercive apparatus to weaken the Revolutionary Guards and its associated militia, the Basij force. For the US, the goal will be to restore maritime traffic, defend its Arab partners better than to date and adapt to Iran's own adaptations. For Iran, it could involve weapons we have not seen deployed much. One of the mysteries of the war is why it has not fired more of its cruise missiles. The optimistic answer is that they have been largely destroyed; the likelier one is that Iran has held many back as they are a particularly useful capability for close combat in the Strait of Hormuz.

After the beating it has taken, the Iranian regime is unlikely to back down because it retains several advantages: geography, time and asymmetry. Iran can target more countries and areas from more positions. The longer the war goes on, the greater the cost to everyone else — and the Iranian regime has superior pain tolerance. When survival is the goal, anything goes.

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