COMMENTARIES

How Iran Turned a Conventional Strike Into a Non-Conventional War

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EXECUTIVE BRIEF & KEY FINDINGS

A war that many feared for years has now erupted across West Asia, and it began with one of the most consequential targeted strikes in the region's recent history. On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel carried out coordinated air and missile strikes across Tehran and other Iranian military sites in an operation reportedly aimed at decapitating Iran's leadership. The strikes killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, along with several senior military commanders and security officials who had gathered at a leadership meeting inside a secure compound in the Iranian capital. Within minutes of the attack, multiple high-ranking figures in Iran's military establishment were reported dead, marking one of the most significant targeted killings in modern Middle Eastern geopolitics. The operation triggered immediate retaliation from Tehran, which launched missiles and drones toward Israel and U.S. positions across the Gulf, while Iran-aligned groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon opened additional fronts. What began as a precision strike quickly evolved into a widening regional confrontation stretching from Iran and Israel to Lebanon, the Gulf, and U.S. military installations across West Asia.

Introduction

Wars rarely unfold the way planners expect. What begins as a controlled military strike often mutates into something far more complex once the targeted state begins shaping the battlefield in its own way. The current crisis in West Asia illustrates this dynamic clearly. What started as a high impact conventional strike against Iran quickly evolved into a dispersed and unconventional confrontation across the region.

Iran's response has not been about matching the United States or Israel tank for tank or aircraft for aircraft. Tehran understands the conventional imbalance. Instead, it has done what it has spent decades preparing for. It has transformed the conflict into a multi layered contest that stretches across geography, economics, and politics. In doing so, Iran has shifted the war from a traditional battlefield into a hybrid struggle that is far harder to control.

Understanding this shift is essential because the nature of a war often determines its trajectory and its eventual outcome.

The Limits of Conventional Power

At the outset, the military balance between the opposing sides appeared straightforward. The United States and Israel possess overwhelming advantages in airpower, surveillance, precision strike capability, and technological sophistication. Any direct conventional confrontation would place Iran at a severe disadvantage.

Iranian planners have long accepted this reality. For years their military thinking has been built around a central question. How can a country facing stronger adversaries impose costs without exposing itself to decisive defeat?

The answer has been the gradual construction of an asymmetric warfare architecture. Missiles, drones, regional militias, maritime pressure points, and psychological operations all form parts of this structure. When the latest round of hostilities began, Tehran activated this architecture almost immediately. Instead of responding on a single battlefield, Iran expanded the battlefield itself.

Expanding the Geography of the War

One of the most notable features of Iran's response has been the deliberate widening of the conflict zone. Rather than focusing retaliation on Israel alone, pressure points began appearing across the wider region.

American facilities, strategic infrastructure, and security partners of Washington suddenly became part of the equation. This forced the United States to divide attention and defensive resources across several locations at once.

This approach serves a clear strategic purpose. A concentrated military campaign can be managed. A dispersed regional crisis is far more difficult to control. Air defense systems must be repositioned, naval assets must patrol larger spaces, and governments hosting foreign forces suddenly face domestic pressure. In effect, Iran turned a bilateral confrontation into a regional security dilemma.

Missile and Drone Warfare as Strategic Equalizers

Iran's reliance on missiles and drones reflects a long-term investment in systems that can challenge technologically superior opponents. These weapons are not meant to defeat advanced militaries outright. Their purpose is to complicate operations and increase the cost of war.

Large waves of relatively inexpensive drones and missiles force defenders to expend expensive interceptor systems. Over time this becomes a contest of resources and endurance rather than a demonstration of technological dominance.

Another advantage lies in unpredictability. Missile and drone attacks can originate from different directions and platforms, stretching surveillance networks and air defense coverage. Even when interception rates remain high, the psychological and financial pressure accumulates. This method does not seek dramatic battlefield victories. Instead it slowly erodes the comfort of military superiority.

The Role of Iran's Regional Network

Perhaps the most significant element of Iran's strategy lies beyond its borders. Over several decades Tehran cultivated relationships with armed groups across the Middle East. These networks provide Iran with strategic reach that conventional armies alone cannot achieve.

When tensions escalate, these groups can open additional fronts or create pressure points that complicate the calculations of Iran's adversaries. The effect is similar to a ripple moving outward across the region.

From Tehran's perspective, this network serves several purposes. It deters attacks by raising the potential cost of retaliation. It provides political influence in multiple countries. Most importantly, it ensures that any conflict involving Iran rarely remains confined to Iranian territory. In the current crisis, this system has again demonstrated its value to Iranian planners.

Economic and Maritime Pressure

Military operations are only one part of modern conflict. Iran has also demonstrated its ability to threaten global economic stability by leveraging geography.

The waters of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz remain among the most critical energy corridors in the world. Even the perception of instability in this area can push oil markets upward and create anxiety among global economies.

By signaling its capacity to disrupt maritime movement, Iran introduces a powerful strategic lever. Countries far removed from the battlefield suddenly have a stake in de-escalation. Energy importers become concerned. Shipping companies reroute vessels. Insurance costs rise.

Psychological and Political Dimensions

Modern wars unfold not only on the battlefield but also in the information space. Statements from officials, dramatic footage of missile launches, and the circulation of battlefield claims all contribute to shaping public perception.

Iran's messaging aims to demonstrate resilience and retaliation. The goal is not only to communicate with domestic audiences but also to influence regional populations and political elites. By projecting the image of an expanding conflict, Tehran seeks to reinforce the narrative that the war will not remain limited or easily controlled. Psychological pressure can sometimes achieve what military force cannot. It introduces uncertainty into the calculations of policymakers.

A Conflict That Has Changed Character

The most striking development in this crisis is the transformation of the conflict itself. What began as a high precision strike campaign has gradually shifted into a hybrid confrontation that spans multiple domains.

Air operations continue, but they now coexist with drone swarms, proxy activity, maritime tension, and economic disruption. The battlefield is no longer defined by a single front line.

This transformation benefits Iran because it blurs the advantages held by stronger militaries. Precision strikes and advanced aircraft are powerful tools, but they are less decisive when a conflict spreads across multiple arenas. In such an environment the objective shifts from rapid victory to endurance.

The Strategic Logic Behind Tehran's Approach

Iran's strategy appears driven by a clear calculation. It cannot defeat its adversaries in a short conventional war. What it can do is stretch the conflict across time and geography until the costs begin to accumulate.

This approach has several advantages. First, it prevents the conflict from becoming a single decisive military engagement. Second, it raises political and economic pressures on opponents and their partners. Third, it strengthens Iran's narrative that it remains capable of responding despite superior military power arrayed against it. In other words, Tehran is attempting to redefine the rules of the contest.

What This Means for the Region

The shift toward unconventional warfare carries serious implications for regional stability. When conflicts spread through networks, proxies, and economic chokepoints, escalation becomes harder to predict. Even actors that do not wish to participate directly may find themselves pulled into the crisis. Shipping disruptions, attacks on infrastructure, and pressure on allied governments all increase the risk of miscalculation. This is why analysts increasingly describe the situation not as a single war but as a regional confrontation unfolding in stages.

Conclusion

Iran's response to the latest round of hostilities reflects years of preparation for precisely this scenario. Recognizing its limitations in conventional warfare, Tehran has focused on reshaping the battlefield rather than confronting it head on.

By expanding the conflict geographically, relying on missiles and drones, activating regional networks, and applying economic pressure, Iran has transformed a traditional military clash into a complex and unconventional struggle.

Whether this strategy succeeds in achieving Iran's political objectives remains uncertain. What is already clear, however, is that the character of the conflict has changed. And once a war evolves in this manner, bringing it back under control becomes far more difficult.