

Iran's likely response to a US attack

written by Dr. Yossi Mansharof | 30.01.2026

Following concerns over the erosion of the regime's strong image amid the protests, senior Iranian officials have intensified their threatening rhetoric toward the US. IRGC Commander Mohammad Pakpour and his deputy, Ahmad Vahidi, have separately declared that Iranian forces are at peak readiness. More significantly, senior decision-making bodies have signaled a shift from reactive deterrence toward preemptive action. On January 6, the Supreme Defense Council stated that Iran would not necessarily wait to be attacked before responding, and on January 11, Majles Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, a member of the Supreme National Security Council, explicitly raised the option of a preemptive strike.

Building on the Supreme Defense Council's statement, the radical wing of the conservative camp, through its affiliated daily *Vatan-e Emrooz*, called on the regime on January 6 to launch a preemptive strike, arguing that the protests reflect an American-Israeli plot to overthrow the regime and that, therefore, any threat to Iran's national security constitutes legitimate grounds for preemptive action. Top Iranian officials have further warned that any attack would trigger strikes on U.S. bases and naval assets in the region, attacks against Israel, and retaliation against regional states that assist U.S. or Israeli operations.

Four scenarios

A notable contribution to this discourse came from *Defa Press*, a news outlet affiliated with Iran's armed forces coordination body. In an analytical article published on January 21, the site outlined four potential Iranian response scenarios to a U.S. attack. These include: (1) missile and drone strikes against Israel and U.S. bases in the region, particularly Al Udeid (Qatar), Incirlik (Turkey), Sheikh Isa (Bahrain), and Al Dhafra (UAE); (2) missile and drone attacks focused exclusively on Israel; (3) closure of the Strait of Hormuz combined with large-scale attacks on U.S. forces in the region; and (4) a coordinated response by Iran and the so-called "Axis of Resistance" against Israel and U.S. assets. Notably, this final scenario includes discussion of a potential ground incursion into Israel,

an idea that has reemerged in recent months, including through commentary by Mehdi Mohammadi, a security analyst and adviser to Majles Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf.

Israel and the United States treat Tehran's threats with full seriousness, including its renewed warnings about closing the Strait of Hormuz. While such a move cannot be dismissed outright, its likelihood remains low. Although the strait is often portrayed by Iran as a strategic leverage point—through which roughly one-fifth of global oil consumption passes daily - its closure would disproportionately harm Iran's own interests. Iranian regime-aligned commentators have acknowledged that approximately 85 percent of the oil transiting Hormuz is tied to Iran's key economic partners, primarily China and India, making sustained closure strategically self-defeating.

Additional tools available to Iran to harm Israel and the US

Over time, Iran's intelligence and terror apparatus have developed capabilities that could be employed against the United States and its allies in a conflict scenario. One such capability is Iran's network of operatives within Israel. Investigations into dozens of Iranian-directed agents apprehended in Israel indicate sustained Iranian efforts to gain access to senior Israeli figures for targeted assassination. Reported targets have included Prime Minister Netanyahu, former Defense Minister Gallant, former Prime Minister Bennett, senior scientists, and other high-level officials. Should Iran retain an active operative with access to a senior figure, a wartime escalation could significantly increase Tehran's incentive to activate this capability in an effort to impose a maximal cost on Israel.

In parallel, the Quds Force and Hezbollah have previously demonstrated the capability to prepare attacks on U.S. soil - the so-called "homeland option." In 2011, 2017, and 2019, they operated three Lebanese Shiite operatives and one Iranian-American in planning terrorist activity inside the United States. FBI investigations revealed that these operatives sought employment that would grant access to sensitive locations and facilitate intelligence collection, including at JFK Airport in New York, as well as against senior Israeli military officials present in the United States. Surveillance conducted by one operative targeted major

landmarks and crowded sites, including the George Washington Bridge, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, Herald Square, the Washington Monument, and Fenway Park. Separately, in 2011, an Iranian-American was arrested for plotting to assassinate Saudi Ambassador Adel al-Jubeir in Washington, D.C. Interrogations of the Lebanese operatives indicate that such sleeper cells are intended to be activated in the event of a direct war between the United States and Iran.

Findings from investigations of Lebanese Hezbollah operatives prompted then-Director of the National Counterterrorism Center Nicholas Rasmussen to warn in October 2017 that Hezbollah is intent on maintaining terrorist infrastructure inside the United States as a core component of its operational portfolio. In subsequent years, Iranian regime figures have implicitly reaffirmed this capability, asserting that Iran can strike the United States on its own territory. Notably, in January 2021, Esmail Qaani - Qassem Soleimani's successor as Quds Force commander - stated that those responsible for Soleimani's killing should know that Iran has the ability to respond "even in their own homes." Similar threats were echoed by a Friday prayer preacher in Yasuj in March 2022, who claimed Iran could strike both Tel Aviv and Washington if attacked. In October 2025, the Mossad further exposed the identity of Mohsen Bargi, the Quds Force official responsible for operations in the United States and Europe. Despite these signals, an attack on U.S. soil would almost certainly trigger a significant American escalation against Tehran, making the use of this capability unlikely under current conditions. However, in the event of a large-scale U.S. strike on Tehran, the regime could consider activating this option as a last-resort deterrent.

The Iranian toolbox necessitates preparedness

An assessment of Iran's conduct during "Am Kelavi" (the Iran-Israel June war) provides insight into the current state of its capabilities. During the conflict, Iran employed missile and drone attacks. Of approximately 550 missiles launched, 69 penetrated Israeli air defenses, resulting in damage to strategic sites and the deaths of 34 Israelis. By contrast, Iran's drone campaign largely failed, with reported interception rates by Israel and the United States approaching 99 percent.

Following the U.S. strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, Iran responded with a missile launch against an American base in Qatar in an operation that was

primarily cognitive and deterrent in nature, having been coordinated in advance with the United States. Tehran also refrained from closing the Strait of Hormuz, apparently recognizing it as a U.S. red line that would trigger a severe response. Iran did not receive meaningful support from the Axis of Resistance, much of which was weakened or incapacitated following the collapse of the Assad regime and the elimination of Hezbollah's senior leadership. Notably, however, Iran did employ its agent network inside Israel to mark targets and assess the performance of Israeli air defense systems.

Should the current escalation develop into a full-scale war, Iran is likely to continue relying mainly on missile and drone attacks, but it may also seek to expand its options by promoting ground-based attacks through its proxies. Among Iran's proxy forces, the Houthis appear to have the capability to pursue such a plan, which requires heightened Israeli preparedness along the Jordanian border.

According to information that has emerged, the Houthis have considered a scenario in which thousands of operatives would move through Saudi Arabia or Iraq into Jordan, acquire weapons there, and attempt to enter Israel from the east. In addition, in November 2025, Defense Minister Israel Katz revealed that the Houthis have also established a presence in Syria, prompting IDF preparations for a possible ground threat from that arena as well.

Beyond proxy forces, Iran may also retain sleeper cells inside Israel intended for activation in wartime, potentially supported by weapons smuggled by the Quds Force through Jordan. A similar risk cannot be ruled out along the Egyptian border, given past weapons smuggling routes. Overall, the more damage Iran sustains in a war, the greater its incentive will be to employ additional tools it has developed, if operationally viable, in order to raise the costs imposed on Israel and the United States and to pressure for an end to the fighting.

Implications for escalation management and preparedness

Iran's past behavior suggests that even in a direct confrontation with the United States, Tehran is unlikely to respond impulsively. Instead, it would likely pursue a gradual, calculated, and multi-theater response. This approach reflects a balance between Iran's desire to impose significant costs on its adversaries and its need to avoid an escalation that could threaten the survival of the regime itself.

Accordingly, the initial Iranian response would likely rely primarily on missile and

drone attacks, which Tehran views as its main deterrent tools and as a way to control escalation. However, as the damage to the regime increases and the conflict drags on, Iran's incentive to expand its range of actions would grow. This could include activating proxies in additional arenas, promoting targeted terrorist operations, and potentially employing sleeper capabilities against U.S. targets, despite the substantial risks involved.

For this reason, effective deterrence and defense require Israeli and American preparedness not only for direct missile threats, but also for lower-probability, high-impact scenarios that may become more likely as Iran's room for maneuver narrows.

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