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Iran's 'Mosaic Defense' Strategy: Decentralization as Resilience Factor

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*(AP Photo/Khaled Elfiqi, File)*

- Iran's defense doctrine relies on a 'mosaic defense' strategy that it has developed over the past decades.
- The decentralization of Iran's command-and-control has made it resilient to U.S. and Israeli decapitation strikes.
- Iran relies on irregular tactics to drag out the war, primarily through economic coercion and cost asymmetry.
- There are significant concerns among U.S. law enforcement authorities that an attack from "sleeper cells" could be conducted on American soil in response to ongoing hostilities

On March 1, as [Operation Epic Fury](#) was well underway, Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi succinctly described Iran's defense strategy in a post on X: "We've had two decades to study defeats of the U.S. military to our immediate east and west. We've incorporated lessons accordingly. Bombings in our capital have no impact on our ability to conduct war. Decentralized Mosaic Defense enables us to decide when—and how—war will end." Two key pillars of Iran's strategy are put forth here: first, observing and adapting to U.S. military weaknesses, and second, complete decentralization of its command and control to ensure resilience and continuity in the event of decapitation strikes.

The decentralized defense strategy referred to here by Araghchi, dubbed 'mosaic defense,' seeks to neutralize the impact of U.S. or Israeli strikes that target its leadership or command-and-control and ensure continuity in the face of any decapitation strike. Araghchi's statement also hints at its reliance on attrition. This aligns with Tehran's broader strategy of asymmetric escalation that has been noted since the start of Tehran's retaliatory strikes, entirely reliant on exhausting U.S., Israeli, and allied defensive resources. Sometimes referred to as 'salami slicing' tactics, this approach extends to Iran's goal to bleed the U.S. and Israel economically, in an effort to bring the war home to their respective populations and ensure that the war remains unpopular domestically for Tehran's foes.

Iran's defense doctrine playing out in real-time since the start of Operation Epic Fury has been decades in the making and was cemented by the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War as well as the Israeli invasion and occupation of Lebanon during the Civil War, both of which were formidable in shaping how Iran and its primary proxy group, Lebanese Hezbollah, view the current fight. According to Matthew McInnis, former U.S. Deputy Special Representative for Iran, these two experiences entrenched a strategy based on proxy and asymmetric warfare, as well as ballistic missiles, to confront adversaries with superior technological capabilities and manpower. The trauma of the Iran-Iraq war, which featured substantive missile use by Iraq on Iranian cities, has anchored ballistic missiles as a key component of Iranian warfare. Its reliance on proxies, meanwhile, was a direct result of the developments of the 1980s, in which Iran sought to project power and safeguard the Revolution by exporting it across the region in the form of proxy groups like Hezbollah.

This three-pronged defense doctrine evolved further in 2005, when the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), under the supervision of General Mohammad Jafari, announced its model of 'mosaic defense' – essentially a decentralized command-and-control system. In an analysis by Dr. Michael Connall, an Iranian military culture expert, this strategy led directly to the restructuring of the IRGC command and control architecture into a system of 31 separate commands, which could launch an insurgency in the case of an invasion and which would make any attempt at degrading Iran's defense exceedingly difficult. According to Connall, this doctrine was derived from careful observations of the limits of U.S. military operations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans. In these conflicts, decapitation strikes on highly-centralized regimes often happened rapidly and tilted the battlefield in Washington's favor within weeks.

The strategy of 'mosaic defense' allows region-bound semi-autonomous IRGC units to call upon Basji forces during times of crisis, thereby enabling a multi-level defense strategy that is highly efficient at responding to emerging threats and largely unfazed by decapitation strikes. Every unit effectively has a full 'military' to its disposal, with its own intelligence capabilities, weapons stockpile, and command-and-control. All four pillars of Iran's defense doctrine – asymmetry, proxies, missiles, and 'mosaic' decentralization - have featured prominently in Iran's strategy to survive the U.S.-Israeli campaign.

The 'mosaic defense' approach was apparent from the first retaliatory attacks by Tehran in the aftermath of Operation Epic Fury. In a statement by Araghchi, strikes against Oman were attributed to a mistake by autonomous units who could not be directly reached, hinting at the continued structure of semi-autonomous units operating with limited communication from the top down. Araghchi stated, "Our military units are now, in fact, independent and somewhat isolated, and they are acting based on general instructions given to them in advance." This likely complicates any ground invasion or ground combat options the U.S. or Israel may seek to conduct in the future if continued airstrikes do not yield the desired results. So far, decentralization seems to have worked: strikes, while not at the same tempo as the beginning of the war, continue as Israel and the U.S. take out leaders and clerics.

Much like its reliance on the 'mosaic defense' system, Iran's missile pillar has become central in the war of attrition it is waging against the U.S. and Israel. After the 12-Day war, Iran's missile capability was significantly degraded due to targeted Israeli strikes. Since June, it has ramped up its production and replenished much of its stock. According to the Israeli Defense Forces, Iran possessed roughly 2,500 missiles at the start of Operation Epic Fury. While U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has explicitly stated that operations will now focus on not just degrading existing stockpiles but also on wiping out production facilities, and CENTCOM Commander Admiral Brad Cooper noted a decline in attack frequency, Iran continues to use its missiles to inflict outside costs on the U.S. both directly and through the cascading economic effects of the war.

Closely related to its missile program is its [asymmetric warfare](#) toolkit, used so far in its retaliatory strikes. Tehran, cognizant of its inability to win a conventional war against the U.S., relies on irregular tactics to drag out the war, primarily through economic coercion and cost asymmetry. A Shahed drone, which costs roughly \$20,000 to \$50,000 per unit to produce, is significantly cheaper than the interceptor systems the U.S. and its allies rely on in the region. Patriot missile interceptors cost roughly \$4m per shot. Leveraging cost asymmetry is a well-established strategy that Iran-backed proxy Yemen has perfected during the Red Sea Crisis, where the U.S. spent billions intercepting relatively cheap missiles that disrupted global trade for months.

Iran has long used its proxies as a method of warfare. It's so-called "Axis of Resistance," consisting of Hezbollah, the Houthis, Hamas, and other Palestinian groups, as well as Iraqi militant groups, allowed it to efficiently and effectively use its strategy of asymmetric warfare. While much of the Axis was severely weakened in the following months and years of the October 7, 2023, Hamas attacks on Israel, [Hezbollah](#) has once again emerged in the present conflict, likely looking to open up a second front for Israel in Lebanon to assist Iran in stretching Israel's resources. On March 3, the Israeli military ordered civilians in southern Lebanon to evacuate to the north of the Litani River, signaling that they are preparing for a ground invasion — effectively stretching Israeli resources beyond just combating Iranian missiles firing down in major cities in Israel. On Thursday, Reuters reported that Hezbollah's elite fighting group, the Radwan force, deployed to the Lebanese-Israeli border to confront and block advances by Israeli tanks.

At the same time, Iran also has a number of proxies, or "sleeper cells" in the U.S. and across the world. According to the New York Times, some U.S. officials have reported hearing "heightened chatter" around the planning and coordination of such attacks, although they have not identified any plots. As Hezbollah expert Matthew Levitt has noted, a Hezbollah operative arrested on U.S. soil in 2017 admitted to being a part of Hezbollah's external operations unit and claimed that he was part of a "sleeper cell" that was instructed to take action if the United States went to war with Iran. Given the existential nature of the conflict for the regime in Iran, there are significant concerns among U.S. law enforcement authorities that an attack could be conducted on American soil in response to ongoing hostilities. When Time magazine asked President Trump about the threat to the [U.S. homeland](#), he replied, "I guess Americans should be worried. "We plan for it. But yeah, you know, we expect some things. Like I said, some people will die. When you go to war, some people will die."