

A U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II aircraft takes off for a mission during Operation Epic Fury, March 14, 2026. U.S. Air Force photo



Expand Photo

USAF Pilot Suffered Shrapnel Wounds after F-35 Hit Over Iran

March 22, 2026 | By Chris Gordon

Listen to audio version of this article



ADVERTISEMENT
Bestselling book summaries in 15-minute text or audio segments. Enjoy Listening!

A U.S. Air Force F-35A pilot suffered shrapnel wounds after their aircraft was damaged during a combat mission over Iran on March 19, people familiar with the matter told Air & Space Forces Magazine.

SHARE ARTICLE

The aircraft was [hit by ground fire](#). Though U.S. Central Command has not provided details, the aircraft was most likely damaged by a surface-to-air missile rather than by small-arms fire or another projectile, given the altitude at which the F-35 typically flies. The incident is under investigation, according to U.S. military officials.



The aircraft later made an emergency landing at an air base in the region, a spokesperson for U.S. Central Command previously said, adding that the pilot was in “stable condition.”

A spokesperson for Central Command declined to comment March 22 when asked about the incident.

Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps posted a video on March 19 purporting to show an F-35 being targeted and struck by an Iranian air defense system. The authenticity of the video has not been confirmed.

On March 22, Iran said it unsuccessfully targeted an [F-15E Strike Eagle](#) with a surface-to-air missile near the Iranian coast. The semi-official Tasnim news agency posted a [video](#) of a purported engagement in which the targeted aircraft appears to dispense flares to counter the threat. Air & Space Forces Magazine has not confirmed the authenticity of Iran’s claims or of the video.

In the March 19 incident, the IRGC said that it “severely damaged” the F-35 in its strike. The U.S. military has not commented on the extent of damage to the aircraft.



Iran has developed air defense systems that can use passive infrared sensors rather than radar to target aircraft, a solution that previously proved effective in Yemen when employed by the Iranian-backed Houthis, which downed around half a dozen [MQ-9 Reapers](#) during Operation Rough Rider last year. The stealthy F-35 evades radar, but infrared sensors home in on heat.

The F-35 is now one of around 20 U.S. Air Force aircraft known to be damaged or destroyed in the nearly three-week-old Iran war.

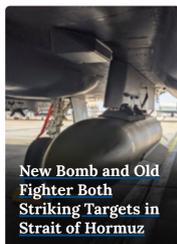
Three F-15E Strike Eagles were [shot down by Kuwaiti F/A-18 aircraft in a friendly fire incident](#) on March 2, according to people familiar with that incident. All crew members were recovered safely.

On March 12, a [KC-135 Stratotanker](#) crashed in western Iraq, [killing all six Airmen aboard](#). Another KC-135 had its tail severely damaged in the same incident but landed safely. In a March 14 social media post, President Donald Trump appeared to confirm that at least one KC-135 was damaged on the ground by Iranian attacks on Saudi Arabia.

As of roughly a week ago, about a dozen MQ-9 Reaper drones [had been lost in the conflict](#). Some of the losses occurred while the aircraft were damaged on the ground by Iran, people familiar with the matter said. Iran has launched retaliatory missile and drone attacks on U.S. bases in the region since the conflict began. The Reaper losses have not been publicly announced.

Air

Trending Stories



Subscribe to the Daily Report

Get your daily fix of Air & Space Force news delivered right to your inbox every day. There's no more reliable source for news about your Air & Space Forces.

Subscribe Today

Command and Control Air Battle Management: The Air Layer Still Matters

Listen Now



Related



Military Prepares to Accept F-35s Without Radars

March 20, 2026

The first F-35 Joint Strike Fighter with ballast, rather than an advanced radar in its nose, flew an acceptance flight the last week of February, Air & Space Forces Magazine has learned. F-35s will arrive without radars at Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps bases for next several months and...



New Liquid Rocket Engine Flight Test Shows Promise for Affordable Hypersonic Missiles

March 20, 2026

A recent supersonic flight conducted at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio could pave the way for affordable, maneuverable hypersonic missiles by leveraging advances in a decades-old technology. The Air Force Research Laboratory and Urso Major, an aerospace and defense company, achieved...



Airpower, Attrition, Superiority: Putting Context

March 19, 2026

High-end combat against a credible defense system has always existed historically, that risk has translated into aircraft losses. What is remarkable in the Iran war is not that a U.S. F-35 combat losses to date have been...

