

How do Israel, Iran's militaries compare?



By David Brennan
Reporter

PERSPECTIVE

Last week's conflagration between Israel and Iran has once again left the Middle East region on the brink of a major war, with Israeli allies and enemies retaliating after Tehran's drone and missile bombardment. Iran's mission to the United Nations said that "the matter can be deemed concluded" after attacks on Saturday night and the early hours of Sunday morning, which saw around 170 drones, more than 30 cruise missiles, and more than 120 ballistic missiles fired at Israel, the Israel Defense Forces said. The vast majority were shot down, the IDF reported.

President Joe Biden reportedly urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to "take the win," the Iranian attack seemingly representing a relatively ineffective but necessary response to Israel's assassination of a top Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander in Syria earlier this month.

Israeli wartime Cabinet member and long-time opposition leader Benny Gantz said that Sunday that Israel intends to "build a regional coalition and exact a price from Iran, in a way and at a time that suits us."

Israel and Iran have been in a "shadow war" for several decades, waged through covert operations, backed regional forces, long-range strikes, and cyber operations, all conducted both inside Iran and Israel. The battle has also been fought in the territory of neighboring nations like Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian territories. Any escalation of the war is likely to follow this formula, rather than a direct and sustained conventional clash.

Israel maintains a standing army of around 170,000 active personnel and 465,000 reservists, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies' 2024 Military Balance report.

The IDF is considered highly trained, well-equipped, and experienced. Military service is compulsory for most Israeli adults after the age of 18, with men expected to serve for 36 months and women for 24 months.



A banner depicting missiles and drones flying past a torn Israeli flag, with text in Persian reading "The next slap will be harder" and in Hebrew "Your next mistake will be the end of your fake state," is seen in Tehran, Iran, on April 14, 2024.

● ATTA KENARE/AFP

Iran has a much larger population, which is reflected in its standing regular military strength of some 420,000 personnel, with another 350,000 reservists. The powerful IRGC is estimated to have between 150,000 to 200,000 active personnel. Israel's air force has been key in its long confrontation with Iran. Israeli aircraft have been routinely used to strike Iranian-linked targets in Syria and Lebanon, including IRGC facilities and personnel. Israeli aircraft were also active in the collective defense against Iran's recent attack, tracking and shooting down drones and missiles.

Israel's air force is considered among the world's most potent. It has around 310 combat-capable fighter and ground attack planes, including 75 F-15s, 196 F-16s, and 39 F-35s, according to the IISS. The air force also has 46 Apache attack helicopters and a wide range of surveillance and attack drones.

Iran's air force is less sophisticated. It is an aging fleet hamstrung by long-imposed international



Israeli military spokesperson Rear Admiral Daniel Hagari (R) and his deputy, Masha Michelson, pose near what they say is an Iranian ballistic missile that they retrieved from the Dead Sea after Iran launched drones and missiles towards Israel, at Julis military base, occupied Palestine, on April 16, 2024.

● GIL COHEN-MAGEN/AFP

sanctions and weapons embargoes. Tehran's air arm is made up of outdated US-made aircraft such as 10 F-14s and 55 F-4s. More recently, Iran has turned to Russia to outfit its air force, and currently has 35 MiG-29s in service, with a new deal to acquire Su-35 fighters agreed upon last year.

Iran has also developed domestically produced fighter jets like the HESA Saeqeh and Azarakhsh, though these are not considered to be capable of competing with foreign-made platforms. Iran's formidable drone arsenal is perhaps more relevant in any future conflict than its air force.

The famous Shahed drone platform and its variants — for example — were central to Tehran's recent strike.

Israel and Iran possess significant missile stockpiles, giving both nations the ability to strike each other's territory directly. Israel has the short-range Jericho 2 ballistic missile with a range of up to 930 miles, encompassing much of the Middle East and parts of Iran. Its Jericho 3 missile has a range of up to 3,000 miles. Shorter-range cruise missiles include the Lora, Delilah, and Gabriel platforms.

Missiles are key to Iran's deterrence and power projection. Tehran's decades of investment have earned it "the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East," according to the CSIS Missile Defense Project.

Its longest-range platforms are the Sejil, Ghadr, and Khorramshahr ballistic missiles, all of which can reach targets out to around 1,240 miles, including all of Israel. Other missiles include the Emad (range over 1,000 miles) and Shahab-3 (range over

800 miles), as well as several other shorter-range cruise missiles. The prominent role expected by aircraft, drones, and missiles makes air defense all the more important for both nations. Israel — with the help of its allies — demonstrated the capabilities of its anti-air umbrella last week, using systems including David's Sling, Iron Dome, and Arrow to down incoming Iranian projectiles. Israel also still has the US-made MIM-104 Patriot.

Iran's most established anti-air defense system is the Russian-made S-300, which is relatively outdated compared with what Israel possesses. Tehran also has the domestically produced Bavar-373 surface-to-air missile platform, as well as the Arman and Azarakhsh defense systems unveiled earlier this year.

At sea, Israel maintains a small but advanced navy, primarily used to defend its coastline and support land and air operations. Its navy includes five submarines, including three Dolphin-class vessels capable of launching nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. Israel also has at least three corvettes, eight missile boats, and 45 patrol boats.

Iran's navy is larger and designed in part to control and potentially shut down strategic maritime bottlenecks like the Strait of Hormuz. Iran has more than 30 submarines, five frigates, three corvettes, and more than 200 patrol craft.

Beyond the conventional realm, both Israel and Iran have fearsome covert, proxy, and cyber capabilities, often used in their simmering confrontation. Israel's Mossad spy agency — for example — has been accused by Tehran of a series of assassinations inside Iran, including of prominent scientists working on the country's nuclear program.

Mossad was also involved in the landmark Stuxnet cyber-attack when Israel and the US used it to target Iranian nuclear facilities in what is generally considered the first major cyber warfare operation.

Iran's Quds force — which operates under the IRGC umbrella and is responsible for Tehran's activities worldwide — poses a constant threat to Israeli and allied interests in the Middle East and beyond.

The article first appeared in Newsweek.

Missiles, drones used by Iran in recent strike on Israel

ANALYSIS

ARMY RECOGNITION — According to the spokesperson of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), Iran fired 170 drones, 110 ballistic missiles, and 30 cruise missiles at Israel on April 13, 2024. Iran launched a significant attack on Israel in retaliation for the bombing of a consulate in Syria by Is-

rael. An IDF spokesperson stated that the barrage of strikes had virtually no effect, as "99% of the drones and missiles" launched by Tehran were intercepted by the Israeli defense system and its American, British, French, and Jordanian allies. In this article, we detail all missiles and drones used by Iran to strike Israeli territory. As a result, very little damage was

caused. No drone entered Israel, and only a few missiles managed to hit their target, the Netivim military base in the south of Israel. The Islamic Republic described the operation as "limited and minimal" but showcased the diversity of its arsenal by using multiple attack vectors. In total, 170 killer drones, 110 ballistic missiles, and 30 cruise missiles were fired.

Shahed drones

The Shahed-136 drones appear to have been launched from Iran towards Israel last night. The Shahed-136 is an Iranian-made loitering munition, commonly referred to as a "kamikaze drone designed to deliberately crash into a target, detonating its onboard explosives upon impact". Their effectiveness is limited: guided by GPS, they can be jammed or

destroyed by anti-air defenses. They can only target fixed locations, which limits their tactical value.

But the Shahed drones have two advantages: their range, several hundred kilometers, and their modest cost, which allows the attacker to save precision missiles and saturate air defenses. This tactic has only partially worked, as only a few rare ballistic mis-

siles managed to breach the Israeli defenses.

During the attack by Iran, videos identified the use of the Shahed 238 drone, an evolution of the Shahed 136, with major improvements in propulsion; the Shahed 238 is equipped with a turbojet engine increasing its speed to over 500 kilometers per hour, compared to 180 for the Shahed 136.