EPINOVA–2026–PB–36

Policy Brief

Who Is Ready Under Renewed Conflict?

A Capability–Sustainability Assessment of the U.S.–Israel–Iran Conflict

Author: Shaoyuan Wu

Affiliation: Global AI Governance and Policy Research Center, EPINOVA LLC

Date: April 20, 2026

Series Information:
This policy brief is part of the EPINOVA Policy Brief Series on Strategic Competition, AI-Enabled Warfare, and Information Conflict.

Recommended Citation:
Wu, Shaoyuan (2026), Who Is Ready Under Renewed Conflict? A Capability–Sustainability Assessment of the U.S.–Israel–Iran Conflict, Policy Brief No. EPINOVA–2026–PB–36, Global AI Governance and Policy Research Center, EPINOVA LLC, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19665929.

Key Judgments

- Readiness diverges across actors along capability and sustainability dimensions, producing distinct warfighting profiles.
- Short-duration conflicts favor the United States, while protracted conflicts favor Iran.
- Israel is structurally predisposed toward escalation but constrained in long-term endurance.
- The primary strategic risk is not defeat, but loss of control under cumulative systemic pressure.

Why This Matters

The risk in the U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict is not primarily military defeat, but the loss of control under sustained systemic pressure. As capability and sustainability diverge, actors may become increasingly effective in different dimensions of conflict while simultaneously losing the ability to manage escalation. This creates conditions in which limited engagements can generate disproportionate and potentially irreversible outcomes. For policymakers, the central challenge is therefore not how to prevail in confrontation, but how to sustain control as pressure accumulates across domains and over time.

Executive Summary

In the event of renewed hostilities, the United States, Israel, and Iran would enter the conflict with distinct readiness profiles across two core dimensions: immediate military capability and long-term sustainability under systemic pressure.

Three implications follow. The United States retains decisive short-term combat readiness, with the capacity to initiate and dominate high-intensity, multi-domain operations. Iran is structurally better positioned for protracted conflict, relying on cost-imposition strategies, distributed systems, and lower-cost offensive capabilities. Israel demonstrates high operational effectiveness but limited sustainability, constrained by geography, force structure, and multi-front exposure.

The central implication is that readiness is multidimensional rather than absolute: actors are prepared for different types of conflict, not the same one.

GLOBAL AI GOVERNANCE RESEARCH CENTER

EPINOVA

Policy Brief

1. Analytical Framework: Capability vs. Sustainability

This brief distinguishes between two analytically separable dimensions of readiness: capability and sustainability.

Capability readiness refers to the ability to initiate and dominate early-phase combat, including force projection, operational integration, strike effectiveness, and escalation management.

Sustainability readiness refers to the ability to absorb cumulative pressure over time, including cost structure, resource regeneration, and system resilience across military, economic, and political domains.

This distinction reflects a broader transformation in modern conflict, from decisive engagements to systemic competition under cumulative pressure.

2. Capability Readiness: United States Dominance

2.1 United States: Immediate and High-End Readiness

The United States maintains clear superiority in long-range precision strike, ISR integration, carrier-based and expeditionary power projection, and multi-domain coordination. Recent posture adjustments, including expanded regional basing and carrier deployments—demonstrate readiness for rapid escalation.

Assessment: The United States is fully prepared to initiate and dominate early-phase combat operations.

2.2 Israel: High Effectiveness, Limited Strategic Depth

Israel demonstrates high-precision targeting capability, rapid decision cycles, and effective operational integration with U.S. forces. However, its readiness is constrained by limited geographic depth, multi-front exposure, and reliance on sustained operational tempo for deterrence.

Assessment: Israel is tactically highly capable, but its readiness remains regionally bounded and intensity-dependent.

2.3 Iran: Persistent Strike Capacity Without Symmetry

Iran lacks parity in air dominance, maritime projection, and integrated joint operations. However, it retains significant missile and UAV inventories, supported by distributed launch infrastructure and underground survivability.

Assessment: Iran is not positioned for decisive conventional victory but remains operationally viable in sustained strike exchange.

2.4 Capability Ranking

United States > Israel > Iran

The divergence between capability and sustainability is structurally significant and defines the relative positioning of the three actors (see **Figure 1**).

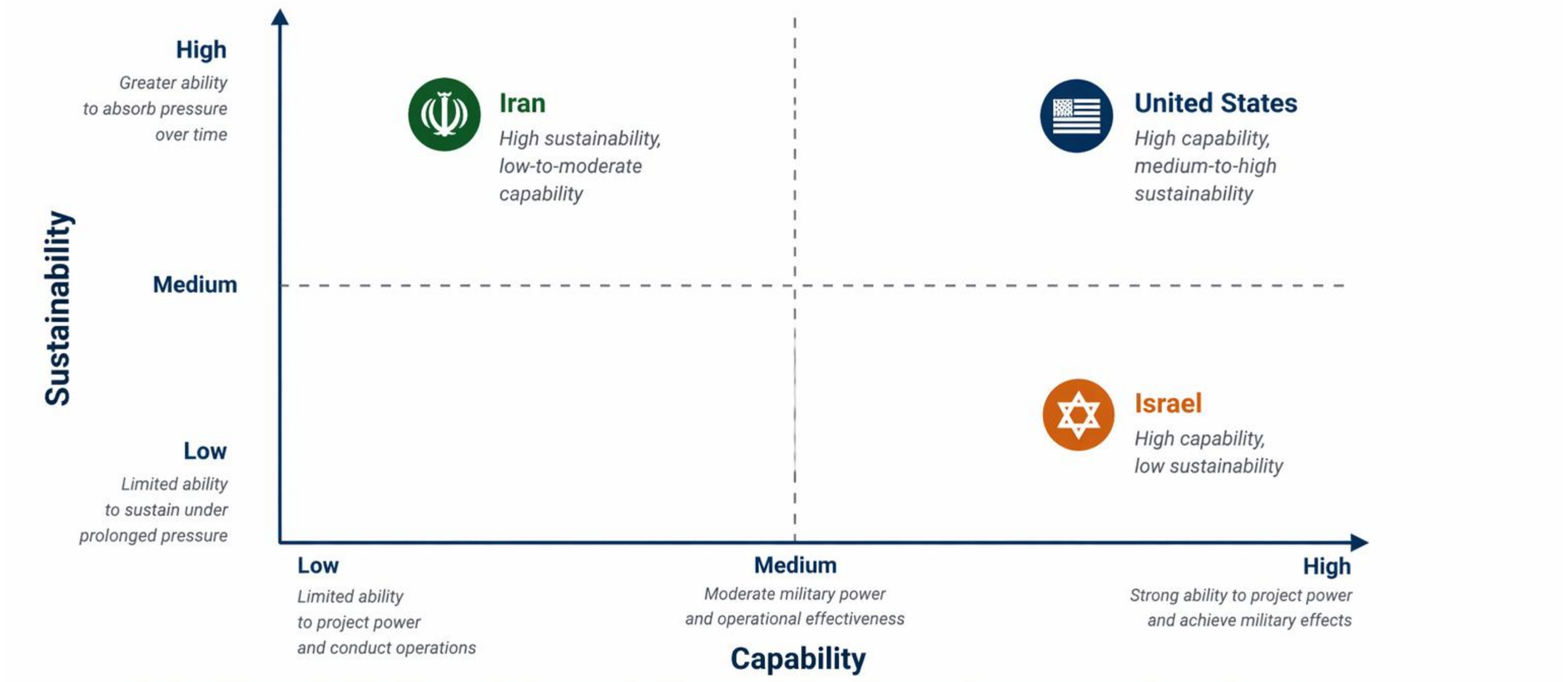

Figure 1. Relative Positioning of Actors by Capability and Sustainability

Note: Capability and sustainability are composite assessments based on operational, economic, and systemic indicators.

Source: Author's analysis.

As shown in **Table 1**, this divergence can be decomposed into differences in cost structure, escalation control, information dynamics, and proximity to the Loss-of-Control Threshold (LoCT).

Table 1. Structural Comparison of Readiness Across the United States, Israel, and Iran

Dimension	United States	Israel	Iran
War Initiation Capability	High	High	Limited
Sustained Operations	Strong	Limited	Strong
Cost Structure	Cost-Disadvantaged	Cost-Disadvantaged	Cost-Advantaged
Information Warfare	Moderate	Moderate	Strong
Escalation Control	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Distance to LoCT	Intermediate	Nearest	Farthest (Current)

Note: Readiness is conceptualized as a composite construct incorporating operational capability, sustainability under cost pressure, information dynamics, and escalation control capacity. LoCT (Loss-of-Control Threshold) refers to the systemic tipping point at which escalation becomes self-reinforcing and difficult to contain. Assessments are relative and based on current conflict conditions.

Source: Author's analysis.

3. Sustainability Readiness: Iran’s Structural Advantage

3.1 Iran: Endurance Through Cost Imposition

Iran’s approach reflects a networked cost-imposition strategy rather than a decisive-war model, in which sustainability is derived not from absolute capability, but from the ability to generate persistent systemic pressure at relatively low cost. This model relies on distributed operational architecture and low-cost offensive systems to accumulate pressure over time.

Under sustained interaction, even moderate strike effectiveness can produce compounding effects, shifting the burden of adaptation onto higher-cost adversaries. As a result, conflict dynamics favor endurance over dominance.

Assessment: Iran is structurally optimized for prolonged conflict and endurance under sustained pressure.

3.2 United States: Sustainability Under Cost Pressure

The United States benefits from industrial depth, global logistics, and alliance support, enabling sustained operations at scale. However, its sustainability is shaped by a cost-pressure dynamic, in which high-end defensive and operational systems generate increasing marginal costs over time.

As conflict persists, resource allocation across theaters, combined with fiscal and political constraints, introduces trade-offs that may gradually reduce strategic flexibility. Sustainability is therefore maintained, but at rising systemic cost.

Assessment: The United States can sustain conflict, but under increasing cost pressure and strategic trade-offs.

3.3 Israel: Escalation Lock-In and Constrained Endurance

Israel faces a structural dynamic of escalation lock-in, in which deterrence credibility depends on sustained operational intensity while de-escalation risks strategic loss. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle in which each round of escalation raises the threshold for subsequent restraint, compressing decision space and constraining strategic flexibility.

Under sustained pressure, this pattern tends to reduce coordination efficiency while increasing decision friction, accelerating movement toward escalation thresholds. The outcome is not gradual degradation, but the risk of rapid transition toward loss of control.

Assessment: Israel is least suited for extended high-intensity conflict.

3.4 Sustainability Ranking

$$\textbf{Iran} \geq \textbf{United States} > \textbf{Israel}$$

4. From Capability to Control: Threshold Competition

The conflict is best understood not as a contest for decisive victory, but as competition over the ability to delay systemic breakdown. Within this framework, the central variable is not battlefield success, but the capacity to avoid crossing the Loss-of-Control Threshold (LoCT).

Each actor follows a distinct risk pathway shaped by its structural position. For the United States, the primary risk lies in strategic and fiscal overextension under sustained cost pressure. For Israel, escalation lock-in compresses decision space and accelerates movement toward threshold conditions. For Iran, cumulative escalation cycles generate persistent pressure that may gradually approach critical tipping points.

Taken together, these dynamics indicate that loss of control emerges not from singular defeat, but from the accumulation of systemic pressure over time.

5. Implications

5.1 No Single “Most Ready” Actor

Readiness is conditional rather than absolute. Short-duration conflicts favor the United States, while protracted conflicts favor Iran. Under conditions of escalation spirals, Israel is the most exposed actor. The implication is that comparative advantage varies across conflict types, rather than across actors in a fixed sense.

5.2 Structural Transformation of Warfare

The conflict reflects a broader transition from overmatch dominance to cost-imposition competition. Under this emerging logic, outcomes are shaped less by peak capability than by the ability to sustain pressure and impose asymmetric costs over time.

5.3 Rising Escalation Instability

Sustained cross-domain interaction increases systemic pressure, compresses decision timelines, and raises the probability of nonlinear escalation. As interactions intensify, the margin for controlled escalation narrows, increasing the likelihood of rapid transitions toward loss-of-control conditions.

6. Limitations and Scope Conditions

This analysis is structural rather than predictive and relies on qualitative, comparative assessments rather than fully quantified metrics. It abstracts from intra-actor dynamics and assumes a bounded conflict system centered on the United States, Israel, and Iran, while third-party actors may alter escalation pathways. LoCT is treated as an analytical construct rather than an empirically fixed point. Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of structural tendencies rather than deterministic outcomes.

Policy Brief

Conclusion

Readiness in the U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict cannot be reduced to a single metric. The United States is best positioned to initiate conflict, Iran to sustain it, and Israel to intensify it, but not endure it.

The decisive question is therefore not who can fight most effectively at the outset, but who can sustain control as systemic pressure accumulates over time. In this sense, modern conflict is a test of control under cumulative pressure.