An Early Military Analysis of the Iran Operation

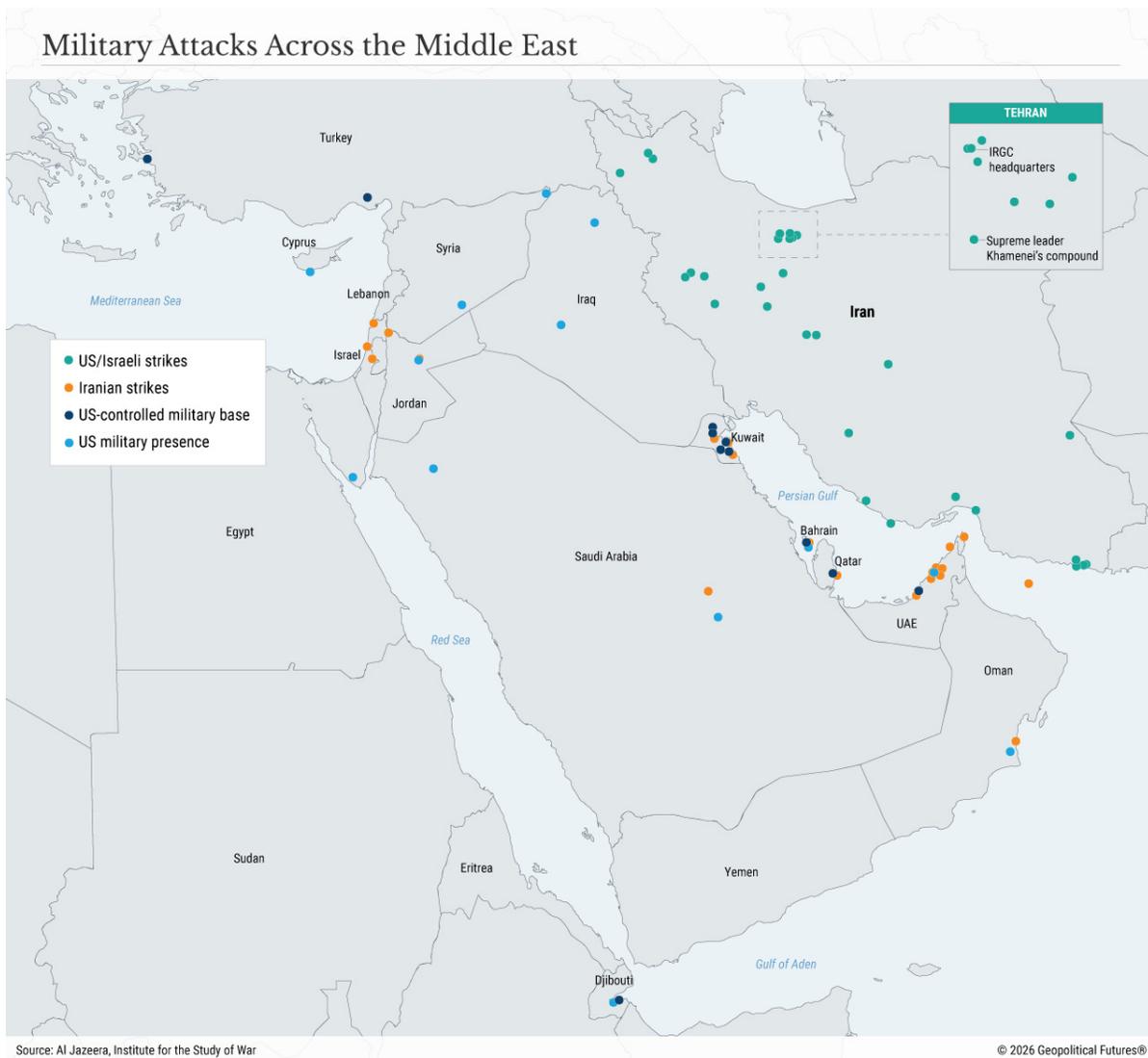**by Andrew Davidson -** March 2, 2026

The opening phase of Operation Epic Fury was a coordinated strike campaign aimed at disrupting Iran's command continuity and degrading its retaliatory capability. Official statements seem to confirm as much: U.S. and Israeli leaders have said the operation was meant to degrade Iran's missile and nuclear capabilities and eliminate imminent threats to U.S. and Israeli forces. Others also mentioned regime change and, in doing so, urged the Iranian people to seize the moment for internal political transformation. Indeed, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, as well as several senior security figures, were killed in the strikes.

From a military perspective, the removal of senior leadership affects political command cohesion. However, the operational design of the strikes indicates a broader objective: Targeting integrated air defenses, radar and sensor networks, ballistic missile infrastructure, and maritime denial capabilities suggests a larger and longer suppression effort against Iran's retaliatory systems. The strike pattern also suggests a functional division of labor, with U.S. forces emphasizing large-scale suppression and degradation of retaliatory infrastructure and with Israeli personnel focusing on leadership and command nodes. The campaign's operational center of gravity, then, depends on the survivability and regeneration rate of Iran's mobile retaliatory systems under sustained suppression.

That officials have described this operation as a multiday campaign implies, in military terms, sequential strike cycles, battle damage assessment and reconstitution of force packages. The determining variable is tempo – that is, whether additional strike cycles continue to deepen earlier damage or whether operational momentum declines before Iran's capabilities are materially reduced.

Initial reporting indicates geographically distributed targeting inside Iran consistent with a suppression-oriented campaign. Strikes were reported in Tehran and surrounding districts associated with central command functions, alongside activity in the Isfahan region and western corridors historically linked to ballistic missile storage and deployment. Additional locations near coastal facilities suggest maritime denial assets were also included in the early target set. The dispersion across central, western and southern operational zones indicates an effort to degrade multiple layers of Iran's retaliatory system while simultaneously opening and securing operational access for follow-on strike cycles.

Iran quickly retaliated against the initial strikes. The response time indicates that Iran maintained preconfigured targeting packages and conditions for multiple targets. Ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial systems were launched toward Israel and U.S. military facilities in Qatar, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The geographic breadth of the response shows that elements of Iran's missile and drone forces remained operational and capable of multiaxial employment despite the opening suppression effort. Iran's response has consisted of sequential launch cycles rather than a single concentrated volley, indicating retained inventory and phased employment of missile and unmanned systems.

Military Attacks Across the Middle East

Legend:
- US/Israeli strikes
- Iranian strikes
- US-controlled military base
- US military presence

TEHRAN
- IRGC headquarters
- Supreme leader Khamenei's compound

Source: Al Jazeera, Institute for the Study of War

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Though air defense systems intercepted many incoming projectiles, impacts were reported in civilian-military environments. Compared with the U.S.-Israeli targeting pattern inside Iran, Iran's pattern relied more heavily on saturation and geographic spread.

The onset of counterfire indicates that Iran's missile and unmanned systems are not wholly dependent on real-time centralized command authorization. Dispersed launcher brigades and contingency activation protocols allow retaliatory operations to proceed even under conditions of political disruption. As a result, decapitation alone does not eliminate launch capacity; durability will depend more on the survivability of mobile platforms and supporting logistics under continued suppression. Still, leadership disruption may weaken centralized control over escalation decisions. While decentralized structures sustain retaliation, they also increase the risk of uneven or poorly calibrated responses, complicating signaling and increasing volatility even if overall missile output declines.

The composition of the strike package indicates that operational access has been established and can be sustained beyond the initial window. Carrier aviation, stand-off naval strike capacity, aerial refueling, and persistent intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance create layered delivery options against mobile launchers and reconstituting air defenses. Naval platforms in the Gulf and Eastern Mediterranean extend strike depth and reduce reliance on fixed regional airfields, though regional basing in Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates remains essential for sortie regeneration and logistics. The durability of these facilities under continued missile pressure will shape operational tempo. Two U.S. carrier strike groups deployed to the region provide operational flexibility and strike depth without relying on fixed regional airfields. However, they are also high-value operational platforms within range of Iranian munitions and drones. Although layered air defense systems and mobility complicate targeting, sustained missile and drone pressure increases the defense burden and introduces operational risk. Significant damage to a carrier would constrain sortie flexibility and likely trigger rapid political and military escalation, intensifying domestic pressure for a decisive response while altering the campaign's operational trajectory.

Magazine depth and munitions expenditure will help determine how long the operation will last. Precision-guided munitions, stand-off weapons and interceptor stocks for regional air defense systems must support not only offensive cycles but also defensive counterfire protection. If Iran's launches remain sequential, U.S.-Israeli interceptor inventories are unlikely to face immediate exhaustion. However, sustained multiday exchanges would increase cumulative pressure on both offensive and defensive stockpiles.

The Israeli campaign against Iran in 2025 is instructive here. It showed the finite nature of both missile inventories and interceptor magazines under repeated launch cycles. Iran's preconflict ballistic stockpile – estimated in the low thousands – was susceptible to rapid drawdown at high tempo, while defensive systems used more interceptors than could be quickly replaced. In the longer run, sustainability will depend less on initial inventory size than on the relative pace of expenditure and resupply. Although Iran maintains indigenous missile assembly and engineering capacity, sustained regeneration depends on access to critical solid-propellant inputs that have historically required external sourcing.

In other words, how long the campaign lasts depends on the alignment between suppression requirements and sustainment capacity. If tanker availability, ISR persistence and munitions depth remain sufficient to support repeated strike cycles, U.S.-Israeli forces can progressively erode Iran's mobile launch capability and supporting infrastructure. If suppression falters or defensive burdens expand, operational tempo may decline before meaningful attrition is achieved.

The campaign now enters a decisive phase in which operational tempo will determine whether suppression produces structural degradation. If suppression pauses after initial disruption, Iran's dispersed missile brigades and affiliated networks will retain the capacity to regenerate coordinated counterfire. In that case, the campaign would function primarily as a means of coercion rather than as a concentrated effort to dismantle the regime.

A third pathway involves a protracted exchange in which neither side achieves decisive results or halts escalation. In that case, campaign durability and sustainment would depend on industrial replenishment, defensive stockpile depth and political tolerance for sustained risk. As the conflict expands to third-party assets – shipping, energy infrastructure and Gulf-based forces – it can also harden alignment among affected states, widening the coalition and raising the political costs of deescalation.

Meanwhile, Tehran has more avenues of retaliation: its network of aligned non-state actors throughout multiple theaters. In Iraq, factions operating under the Popular Mobilization Forces umbrella have historically targeted U.S. facilities and could expand the conflict's operational footprint without requiring additional conventional missile launches from Iranian territory. In Lebanon, Hezbollah maintains a substantial rocket and missile arsenal capable of opening a northern front against Israel. In Yemen, Houthi forces retain the ability to threaten commercial shipping in the Red Sea, while naval elements within Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps maintain asymmetric options in the Persian Gulf, including harassment operations, continued disruption in the Strait of

Hormuz, and threats against U.S. naval assets. Iranian officials have framed U.S. and allied military installations and facilities as legitimate targets. Reports that offshore energy infrastructure in the UAE was struck indicate that oil and gas markets could be an additional lever of pressure. Continued pressure would widen the conflict and increase defensive burdens without directly restoring degraded missile capacity inside Iran.

Sustained suppression that materially degrades Iran's retaliatory architecture would diminish its ability to execute coordinated, high-tempo counterfire, shifting future conflict dynamics away from state-directed ballistic attacks and toward more decentralized or asymmetric avenues. This erosion, even if gradual, would weaken Iran's coercive leverage and reshape regional deterrence perceptions, affecting not only immediate conflict outcomes but broader strategic behavior in the Gulf.

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