

Military Developments and Scenarios in the 2026 U.S.-Israel War on the Islamic Regime

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INTRODUCTION

On 28 February 2026 the United States and Israel initiated Operation Epic Fury/Roar of the Lion against the Islamic Republic of Iran (hereafter the regime) following stalled nuclear negotiations. This campaign began with decapitation strikes that killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and much of the senior leadership and destroyed parts of Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile infrastructure. The operation's stated goals include eliminating Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities and toppling the regime through popular uprising, while avoiding a long U.S. ground war. Since airpower alone rarely produces regime change, the plan's success depends on internal revolt supported by precision air and naval attacks. This report synthesizes opensource intelligence from American, Israeli, Iranian and other regional sources to present a comprehensive situation report and scenario analysis.

Military Phases and Current Situation

Phase 1 – Internal Dissent and PreWar Weakness (Dec 2025 – Feb 2026)

Mass Protests and Crackdown: In late 2025 the regime faced nationwide protests driven by economic hardship. Islamic Regime security forces killed tens of thousands of demonstrators and arrested over 26 thousand according to some sources, showing both the regime's fragility and its willingness to use lethal force. Israeli commentators noted that cracks were evident in the ruling elite and that opposition activity could eventually erode regime control.

Phase 2 – Decapitation and Strategic Air Campaign (28 Feb – midMarch 2026)

Decapitation Strikes: On 28 February the U.S. and Israel launched hundreds of strikes against Tehran, targeting the presidential palace and Supreme National Security Council; several Islamic Regime leaders were killed. President Trump told Iranians the aim was to destroy missile and nuclear capabilities and encourage regime change, offering immunity to Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) members who defected.

BallisticMissile Suppression: The joint air campaign destroyed or rendered inaccessible

over half of Iran's estimated 470 ballistic missile launchers and repeatedly struck major bases such as Imam Hossein near Yazd, Bid Ganeh (Tehran province) and Chamran base. These attacks severely degraded Iran's ability to launch mass missile salvos and were coupled with naval strikes on Kharg Island to prevent mining operations.

Regime's Response: The Islamic regime launched multiple waves of missiles and drones against Israel, hitting Tel Aviv, Kiryat Gat and Ashkelon, but the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) intercepted the majority of ballistic missiles. Islamic Regime also struck U.S. bases and Gulf states; the Houthis attempted to attack ships in the Red Sea even though their attacks remained of limited impact. Proxies such as Hezbollah fired dozens of rockets and increased drone use, prompting Israeli ground operations in southern Lebanon.

Phase 3 – Containment and Naval Pressure (midMarch 2026)

Expansion into Lebanon: ISW reports that Israeli leaders plan a large scale ground maneuver in southern Lebanon to push Hezbollah north of the Litani River and dismantle its military positions. The IDF has deployed additional divisions and engineering battalions to the northern border. Despite this expansion, U.S. officials asked Israel to avoid bombing Lebanese state infrastructure to prevent escalation.

Kharg Island Attacks: On 13 March U.S. forces struck Kharg Island, destroying naval mine and missile storage facilities. This attack aims to secure shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. British maritime authorities reported no vessel attacks in the strait in the following 48 hours but warned the environment remains critical.

Diplomacy and Mediation: Oman and Egypt attempted to broker a ceasefire, but neither the United States nor Iran was ready to negotiate. France proposed a three stage peace plan for the IsraelLebanon front that would require Hezbollah's disarmament and would redeploy Lebanese Armed Forces south of the Litani River, but this initiative does not directly address the Iran campaign.

Phase 4 – Proxy Escalation and Economic Warfare (late March 2026 and beyond)

Islamic Regime MultiPhase Plan: Military analyst Col. Hatem K. AlFalahi outlined Iran's defensive plan: (1) absorb the initial U.S. strike; (2) saturate U.S./Israeli defenses with large numbers of missiles and drones; (3) activate regional proxies to open new fronts;

and (4) threaten the global economy by closing the Strait of Hormuz and Bab alMandeb. Iranian officials have indeed targeted Gulf states and threatened to mine straits, but their capability to close Hormuz has been degraded by precision strikes.

Mosaic Doctrine: Analysts note the regime’s Mosaic Doctrine—delegating operational autonomy to local units—allows forces to continue fighting despite leadership decapitation. This doctrine has helped maintain control after the initial strikes and explains why the regime has not collapsed despite mass casualties among senior commanders.

Proxy Operations: Hezbollah’s daily rocket attacks, Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) drone strikes on U.S. bases, and Houthi missile launches against Gulf states illustrate Iran’s ability to expand the conflict horizontally. However, Israeli sources argue that Hezbollah’s actions remain limited and primarily signal deterrence rather than provide significant support to Islamic Republic.

U.S. and Israeli Strategies

Precision Air Campaign

Aim to Degrade Missile and Nuclear Capabilities: The U.S.–Israeli air campaign systematically destroys Iran’s ballistic missile infrastructure, command centers, and nuclear facilities. The United States used GBU57 “bunkerbuster” bombs to strike underground sites at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan in June 2025; the Defense Intelligence Agency initially assessed limited damage but the CIA later reported severe destruction requiring years to rebuild. A new wave of strikes in 2026 targeted hundreds of sites across Iran, with Israeli intelligence claiming more than 6 000 targets hit.

Decapitation and Psychological Operations: By eliminating Khamenei and key IRGC leaders, the coalition aims to decapitate the regime and encourage defections. Trump publicly urged Iranians to rise up and called on IRGC soldiers to surrender for amnesty. **Naval & Economic Pressure:** Strikes on Kharg Island and other naval bases degrade Iran’s ability to mine sea lanes. Trump has warned Tehran that if the Strait of Hormuz remains

closed he will target Iran's major energy infrastructure.

Ground Campaign Options and WarGame Analysis

Limited Seizure of Kharg Island

Objectives: Kharg Island exports much of Iran's oil; seizing it would deny the regime revenue and provide a staging ground to control Hormuz. Newsweek reports that this option has garnered attention because of Trump's comments and its relative feasibility.

Forces Required: Retired CENTCOM commander Gen. Joseph Votel estimated an island seizure would require 800–1 000 Marines and significant air and logistical support. Military analyst Ben Connable argues that an amphibious landing would be risky; V22 Osprey aircraft could insert a battalion by air.

Risks: Once ashore, U.S. forces would be vulnerable to Iranian missiles and drones; holding the island would require constant air cover and supply, making them "sitting ducks". This operation alone is unlikely to pressure Tehran into capitulation.

Controlling the Strait of Hormuz and Southern Coast

Expanded Objectives: To protect shipping, analysts suggest occupying a coastal arc from BandareJask to Kish Island, including Bandar Abbas, and controlling inland terrain to northern hills. This would require clearing mines and protecting forces from longrange antiship cruise missiles.

Force Requirements: Connable assesses that securing the strait would need two Marine Expeditionary Units, an 82nd Airborne Division brigade combat team (≈3 000 troops) and the 75th Ranger Regiment, supported by carrier groups and extensive logistics. This scale approaches the early Iraq War and may exceed the Trump administration's appetite for casualties.

Raids on Nuclear and Missile Sites

Objective: A more surgical option involves brief incursions to seize or destroy enriched uranium stockpiles and hardened missile sites. Votel notes that retrieving uranium deep inside Iran would require a brigadesized force (1 000–4 000 troops) plus logistic support and would be complex and risky. Such raids could degrade nuclear capabilities without holding territory but might still trigger fierce Iranian resistance.

Northern or Western Invasion Corridors

Azerbaijan/Kurdistan Corridor: Some commentators discuss potential ground routes through Azerbaijan or northern Iraq to reach Iranian Azeri and Kurdish regions. However, the mountainous Zagros range and the regime's basij militia present formidable obstacles. U.S. and Israeli forces have no staging areas in Azerbaijan; Turkey and Iraq are unlikely to support an invasion.

Khuzestan/Basra Corridor: Another route would be from Kuwait or Iraq's Basra region into Khuzestan, Iran's oilrich southwest. This area is heavily defended; Iranian forces have extensive fortifications, and the local Arab population may not uniformly support an invasion. Without significant local uprising, this corridor could resemble the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq War trench battles.

Islamic Regime's Defensive Strategy

- **MultiStage Response:** According to Hatem AlFalahi, Iran intends to absorb initial strikes, flood air defenses with missiles and drones, activate proxies, and choke global trade by closing Hormuz and Bab alMandeb. Iran may also mine straits or attack shipping. Western forces must therefore keep maritime corridors open and neutralize Iranian antiship missiles.
- **Leveraging Proxies:** Iran uses Hezbollah, Iraqi PMF groups, and Yemeni Houthis

to attack U.S. and Israeli targets. Newsweek notes that Tehran hopes to pressure Gulf states into lobbying Washington for a ceasefire by threatening regional energy infrastructure. So far, U.S. and Israeli strikes on proxy bases in Syria and Iraq have limited these attacks.

- **Mosaic Doctrine and Command Resilience:** Farzan Sabet describes the regime's collective leadership and mosaic doctrine.
- **Sampson Option Threat:** Israeli security officials caution that if the regime feels it is collapsing, it may attempt a "Sampson option" by launching missiles at Israel's Dimona nuclear facility, escalating the conflict to nuclear brinkmanship. Israeli missile defense batteries must remain vigilant against such a lastditch strike.

Scenario Analysis and War Games

We adopt a standard military planning approach by identifying variables (force ratios, terrain, logistics, public support, external actors) and constructing plausible scenarios. None are predetermined; policymakers must prepare for each.

Scenario 1 – Rapid Decapitation and Popular Uprising (BestCase)

Assumptions: Continued precision strikes decimate Iran's missile, air and naval assets; charismatic opposition leaders emerge; economic hardship and resentment lead to nationwide protests; IRGC defections increase after Trump's amnesty offer; proxies remain contained and cannot help.

Outcome: Millions join protests; security forces collapse; a transitional council forms with Western backing; the regime falls. U.S. and Israeli forces avoid ground invasion and provide humanitarian aid.

Risks: Requires sustained protest momentum and unified opposition, which may not materialize.

Scenario 2 – Limited War and Negotiated Surrender

Assumptions: The air campaign degrades Iran's capabilities and isolates the regime. Facing economic collapse and international isolation, the remaining leadership agrees to

Trump's conditions—verifiably dismantling the nuclear program, surrendering missile stockpiles and allowing international oversight. Israeli analysts suggest the regime might choose negotiation to remove military pressure.

Outcome: A negotiated settlement ends major hostilities within weeks; sanctions relief is tied to compliance; Iran remains a theocratic republic but is considerably weakened.

Risks: Verification challenges; hardliners might sabotage negotiations; without regime change, the regime will escalate its repressive capacity to contain its population, Iran could rebuild capabilities covertly.

Scenario 3 – Prolonged Air Campaign and Stalemate

Assumptions: The regime absorbs losses and continues to fire missiles and drones; protests simmer but do not topple the government due to fear of repression and mosaic doctrine resilience. U.S. and Israeli strikes continue for months, with occasional pauses for mediation attempts.

Outcome (Unlikely): The conflict becomes a war of attrition. Iran suffers severe economic damage, but the regime remains in power; global oil markets endure sustained volatility; proxies keep attacking U.S. bases and Israeli towns; a humanitarian crisis develops.

Risks: Escalation by proxies, miscalculation leading to strikes on Gulf oil facilities, and war fatigue in the U.S. and Israel. Without decisive victory or negotiation, this scenario could last for years.

U.S. and Israeli Strategic Calculations

U.S. approach

The United States has pursued a phased strategy that draws heavily on air and naval power. After decapitating the regime's leadership and degrading air defences, U.S.

planners shifted to destroying ballistic missile infrastructure and striking Iran's defence industrial base. The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) describes how U.S. aircraft fired Tomahawk cruise missiles and Precision Strike Missiles at hardened missile facilities, while MQ9 Reapers loitered over Tehran to facilitate dynamic targeting. This focus on fixed targets and supply chains reflects U.S. doctrine that emphasises joint operations, precision strike, and command of the air to paralyse an adversary early in a conflict.

Washington has largely ruled out a large scale ground invasion. Wargaming analysis from The War Zone cites former CENTCOM commander Joseph Votel, who assessed that seizing Kharg Island—an oil export hub—would require 800–1 000 Marines and provide little tactical value, while recovering enriched uranium from deep inside Iran would demand brigadesized forces (1 000–4 000 troops), extensive logistics and air cover. Such operations are judged feasible but high risk and would expose American troops to Iranian attrition tactics. Consequently, U.S. strategy has focused on air, maritime and special operations, paired with economic warfare and support for popular uprisings. Intelligence reports suggest the Pentagon has prepositioned B52 and B1 bombers in Britain and Diego Garcia, ready to augment the air campaign.

Israeli strategy

Israel's operational concept is often described as “mowing the grass.” This phrase, coined in Israeli strategic discourse, refers to repeatedly degrading an enemy's capabilities without necessarily conquering territory. Israel has prioritised the killing of senior Islamic Republic and Hezbollah leaders and the destruction of command and control nodes. Israeli F16s and F15s have flown hundreds of sorties against missile launchers, air defence batteries and energy facilities, working in coordination with U.S. aircraft. Analysts note a clear division of labour: Israel focuses on northern and central Iran while U.S. forces strike southern Iran. Israel's deep clandestine networks inside Iran and the success of Mossad directed raids on air defence radars during previous conflicts have enabled precise targeting and high tempo operations. Prime Minister Netanyahu's endstate appears to be full regime change. While Trump seeks a negotiated settlement

with moderate elements, Netanyahu favours a prolonged campaign designed to weaken the IRGC and prevent Iran from threatening Israel for decades. This divergence has occasionally produced friction; however, the combined air campaign has largely remained synchronized.

Integration of U.S. and Israeli strategies

The U.S.–Israeli partnership has produced synergy greater than the sum of its parts. IISS notes that combining over 200 U.S. fighter aircraft with roughly 300 Israeli fighters and access to Mediterranean logistics has extended the air campaign well beyond the three or four day window predicted by critics. The campaign demonstrates the ability to modulate targeting among leadership, command and control, missiles, air defences and naval assets, using preplanned target sets and dynamic retasking. The synergy has allowed U.S. forces to keep heavy bombers in reserve for a potential escalation.

Islamic Regime's Strategic Calculations – Mosaic Defence and Asymmetric Warfare

Mosaic Defence doctrine

After decapitation strikes killed Khamenei and other leaders, Tehran activated a decentralised defence strategy known as Mosaic Defence. Modern Diplomacy describes this doctrine as a fragmented yet interconnected operational architecture designed to survive leadership decapitation. Operational authority diffuses to autonomous tactical centres across provinces, allowing military units to act with relative independence when central communications are disrupted.

Key features of Mosaic Defence include:

- **Decentralisation:** Command is distributed among IRGC, Basij militia, regular army and naval units organised into regional and semi-independent layers.
- **Attrition and endurance:** Iranian planners treat war as a test of endurance rather than firepower; they aim to raise the cost for the adversary.

- **Forward defence and regional depth:** Iran’s military actions extend beyond its borders. Mosaic Defence leverages proxies—Hezbollah, Iraqi militias and the Houthis—to widen the conflict and relieve pressure on Iranian territory.
- **Redundancy and survivability:** The architecture ensures that the loss of central leadership triggers a reconfiguration rather than collapse; periphery units assume centre roles.

Islamic Regime longwar planning

Al Jazeera’s feature on “The Fourth Successor” emphasises that mosaic defence is rooted in a longwar doctrine. Former IRGC commander Mohammad Ali Jafari reorganised Iran’s military into regional and semi-independent commands to ensure continued operations after decapitation. In war, the Artesh (regular army) absorbs the first blow; air defence units use concealment and deception; and the IRGC and Basij transition to attritional warfare through ambushes and disruption across urban and rural terrain. Naval forces employ antiaccess tactics in the Gulf, while missile forces impose costs on enemy infrastructure. Iran’s longwar theory also emphasises time as a weapon—producing cheap weapons and forcing the adversary to spend more on defence to make prolonged conflict unsustainable.