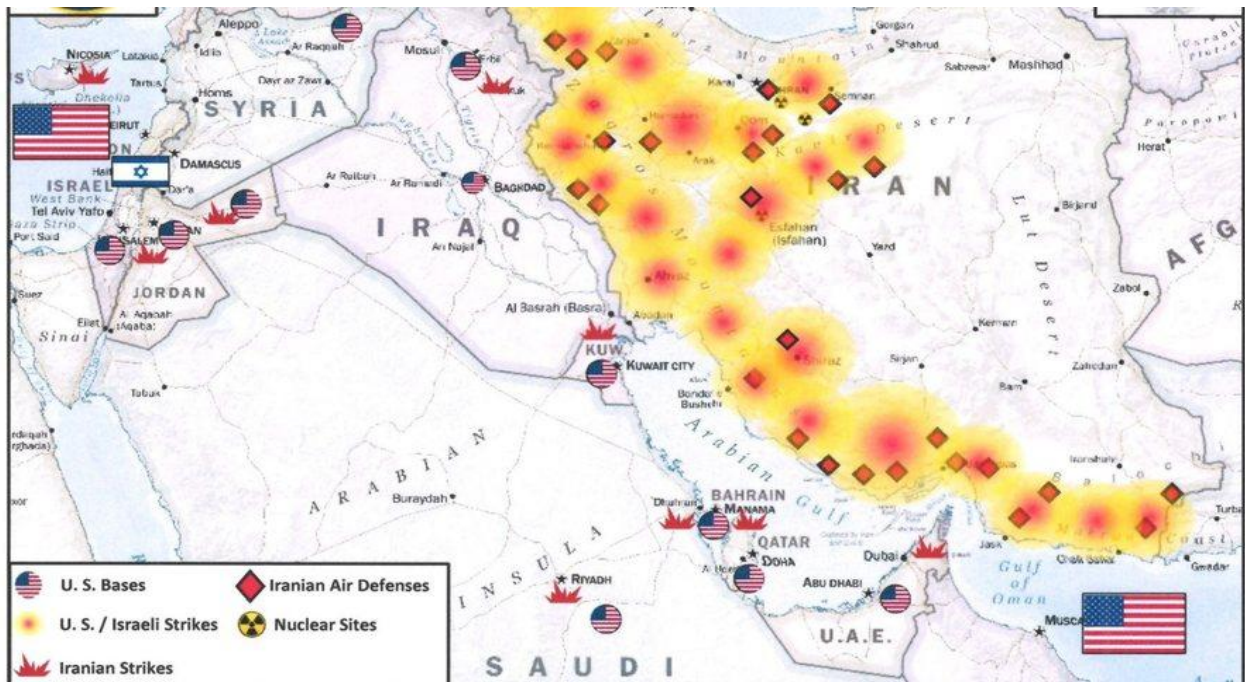


Kinetic Limited Strikes in Preventing Nuclearization: Lessons from the Operation Epic Fury

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Introduction

The launch of Operation Epic Fury on 28 February 2026 is a paradigm shift in the international security order and a stark refusal to accept nuclear non-proliferation principles grounded in diplomacy that have served as the main pillars of the world order over the past 50 years. The conflict, which has arisen pending the perceived depletion of three cycles of mediation in Oman, is the main case study in a new doctrine of preventive industrial targeting, which is aimed at resolving the issue of proliferation not by relying on a surgical strike solely, but by dismantling the military-industrial capability of a country systematically. The size of the

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operation, having more than 1,000 targets in the first twenty-four hours, and the incorporation of frontier artificial intelligence in the kill chain, signifies the shift to more conventional counterforce operations to a paradigm of distributed multi-domain escalation. This is the main issue confronting any attempt to undertake Operation Epic Fury: can a massive kinetic campaign really be used to kill a mature and hardened nuclear program, or will it simply serve to bury the threat even deeper and bring a regional conflagration that will wipe out the very international order it is designed to preserve?

The Preventive War

The tension that had arisen due to the breakdown of the diplomatic structure at the beginning of 2026 was what led to the need to change the practice of containment to active degradation. Institutional traditionalism was ignored in the communication by the Trump administration when launching Operation Epic Fury, which started with a social media announcement of the strikes and circumvented the traditional method of revealing actions to the media by Congress, instead informing it during the last minutes before action. This unorthodox action was an element in a larger campaign of vandalism, which would put the Iranian leadership on its heels and also send an international message that the old rules-based policy of Iranian nuclearisation was at an end. The administration defended the strikes by citing Iranian unwillingness to abandon their nuclear program and as a retaliation against their exercising of a conventional military build-up, i.e., ballistic missiles and drones, as an umbrella against their nuclear extortion.²

The limited scope of goals of the campaign was the breadth that confronted the traditional meaning of a limitless strike. President Trump and Secretary of War Pete Hegseth listed four main military objectives that include the prevention of the acquisition of nuclear weapons, destroying the Iranian ballistic missiles and weapons manufacturing facilities, crippling the Iranian navy, and sabotaging the proxy networks.³ But with such additions as the concept of leadership decapitation and a clear program to motivate the Iranian people to overthrow their own government, it became clear that there was a more insidious purpose behind the whole concept of regime change. This broadening of the mission profile turned counterproliferation

² The US Central Command, “U.S. Central Command | Operation Epic Fury,” 2026, <https://www.centcom.mil/OPERATIONS-AND-EXERCISES/EPIC-FURY/>.

³ Joseph Rodgers and Bailey Schiff, *Operation Epic Fury and the Remnants of Iran’s Nuclear Program*, February 28, 2026, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/operation-epic-fury-and-remnants-irans-nuclear-program>.

attack into an all-out regional war as the coalition aimed to accomplish in weeks what decades of economic sanctions had been unable to bring about.

The instantaneous tactical contrast between Operation Epic Fury and the preceding June 2025 Operation Midnight Hammer brings out the change in the doctrine of prevention. Although Midnight Hammer devoted attention to the particular enrichment centers, the issue of the current highly enriched uranium stockpile was not addressed.⁴ Epic Fury was internationally meant to be a salvo to a bigger war, targeting the systematic fall of the Iranian government and not necessarily its nuclear hardware alone. This development implies that to be effective in the eyes of the planners today, modern preventive strikes have to include the whole state machine, shifting towards a targeting based on precision counter force, to be counter-industrial in nature.

AI Acceleration and the Kill Chain Automation

The main feature of the first seventy-two hours of the operation Epic Fury was the ultimate incorporation of the AI Acceleration Strategy, which enabled the U.S. and Israeli forces to work at a pace that was beyond human thinking ability. To use some 2.3 petabytes of multi-layered information, the Department of War applied frontier AI models, namely Palantir Maven Smart System and Claude, provided by Anthropic (which, despite being officially blacklisted by the administration, continues operating) to it.⁵ This information contained 120 million satellite images, signals intelligence information, and day-to-day life patterns of the Iranian leadership, so that on the initial day, more than 1,000 targets could be identified.⁶ This technological advancement was not only a managerial one, but it was, in terms of quality, the transformation of the use of military force, in that the human factor in the kill chain was diminished to the mere performativity of rubber-stamping approval.

The use of AI especially occurred regarding the orchestration of the Low-Cost Uncrewed Combat Attack Systems (LUCAS) that were based on Iranian Shahed-136 aircraft in reverse engineering.⁷ These swarms of drones were used in an attempt to saturate Iranian integrated air defence systems to disrupt them into digital smokescreens, permitting top-notch platforms such

⁴ Jean Galbraith, "United States Bombs Iran's Nuclear Facilities," *American Journal of International Law* 119, no. 4 (2025): 798–806, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ajil.2025.10110>.

⁵ Gaby Tejada, "AI Integration in Operation Epic Fury and Cascading Effects," *The Soufan Center*, March 3, 2026, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2026-march-3/>.

⁶ opinion contributor Craig Albert, "AI and Autonomous Weapons: The Future of Warfare," Text, *The Hill*, March 20, 2026, <https://thehill.com/opinion/technology/5790157-ai-military-revolution-warfare/>.

⁷ HSToday, "Algorithmic Warfare in the Iran Conflict: Operation Epic Fury and Dawn of the AI Battlefield - HSToday," AI and Advanced Tech, <https://www.hstoday.us/>, 2026, <https://www.hstoday.us/subject-matter-areas/ai-and-advanced-tech/algorithmic-warfare-in-the-iran-conflict-operation-epic-fury-and-dawn-of-the-ai-battlefield/>.

as F-35 and F-22 aircraft to fly within the vicinity with minimal danger. The independent, collaborative strategies of the LUCAS swarms, via mesh networking, radically changed the calculus of attrition of the confrontation since the Iranian military had to waste high-cost interceptors on low-cost targets.⁸ This precise mass approach has been created as a direct reply to the susceptibility of costly military hardware in a long-term conflict, indicating that the future will be characterized by what can continue to be mass-produced of autonomous systems. Yet, the computerized process of targeting entailed systemic risks and moral gauges too. International law experts quoted the strike on a school of girls in Minab, which left at least 85 people dead, and the political leaders, having no military connection, who were killed in an extrajudicial killing, as possible war crimes, as a consequence of the absence of the human factor. The pace of an AI-based cycle of targeting implied that commanders did not have a lot of time to consider the overall political or humanitarian consequences of individual strikes.⁹ This conflict between operational effectiveness and ethical responsibility is the main dilemma of the unsolved problems of the so-called AI-enhanced fighting force, since the cognitive load of deadly action becomes not a human judgment, but a machine rationale.

The Isfahan Paradox

Working tropical cyclone Violet was the biggest disaster that struck during the use of Operation Epic Fury. Although the firepower released was huge, the most important part of the nuclear program, the swarm of 440.9 kilograms of 60-percent enriched uranium, was not damaged.¹⁰ This was stored in deep underground tunnels, which were next to the Nuclear Technology Centre in Isfahan, and contained enough nuclear armaments to equip about ten nuclear bombs, which were further refined. The bombed areas were the overhead entrances and support structures, but the chambers dug in the ground were buried at such depths that they could not even be hit by the biggest bunker-busters in the U.S. arsenal.¹¹ This is that the material will simultaneously remain once undestroyed, but as a physical construct, will be inaccessible both to the Iranian regime and to the international community.

⁸ Zaza Tsotniashvili, *Algorithmic Warfare in the Iran Conflict: AI-Driven Decision Compression, the Erosion of Human Oversight, and Accountability Gaps in Contemporary Military Operations*, March 4, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18859997>; Global Security, "Algorithmic Warfare Cross-Functional Team (AWCFT) / Project Maven," 2026, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/systems/maven.htm>.

⁹ Naim Baig, *Operation Epic Fury and the Illusion of Decisive Force: America's Strategic Miscalculations in the Iran War of 2026* (2026), <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.25530.25284>.

¹⁰ Baig, *Operation Epic Fury and the Illusion of Decisive Force*.

¹¹ Dr Asif Nazir and Prof Dr Abdul Qadir Mushtaq, "Operation Epic Fury: Hybrid Warfare and Legal Erosion in the 2026 US-Israel-Iran Conflict," *Research Consortium Archive* 4, no. 2 (2026): 1142–50.

This inability to cancel the HEU stockpile speaks of a big deficiency in the effectiveness of a limited kinetic attack on mature nuclear systems. Since Iran had now acquired the lessons of the Osirak and Al-Kibar attacks, it had decentralized and hardened its nuclear terrain so that a conventional air attack would not be able to strike its most important targets.¹² Iranian troops were reportedly trying to remove the rubble in the Isfahan tunnels to allow them to access the uranium, whilst the international community was being afflicted by a complete collapse of continuity of knowledge.

Since the start of the strikes, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has had no way of knowing the size or the status of the stockpile, as it has been unable to confirm this, and this has created a cloud of uncertainty that makes it difficult to resolve this diplomatically in the future.

The stalemate during the battle at Isfahan indicates that the strategy to avoid nuclearization only by the use of force would not be sufficient, and it is necessary to have more than bombardment by air attacks. Military authorities have indicated that the number of ground troops needed to physically infiltrate the tunnels and carry the material to secure the HEU is very high, and logistical and political risks are high in this mission. The transport issue is of great concern; highly enriched uranium cannot just be loaded onto a helicopter, particularly in an active battlefield.¹³ Therefore, although the coalition managed to destroy the centrifuge facility and make the Iranian system of nuclear enrichment inefficient, there remains a latent nuclear threat due to the lack of elimination of the fissile feedstock, thus continuing to loom over the region.

Counter-Industrial Targeting and Revision of Attrition

Operation Epic Fury takes the revival of the concept of counter-industrial targeting as the key US strategy. In contrast to past actions, which emphasized precision counterforce, which means the annihilation of active military forces and command system, this action was to destroy the entire military manufacturing infrastructure of Iran on a large scale. Attacking more than 10,000 targets in Iran, such as missile production facilities, naval facilities, and dual-use industrial beltlands, the coalition aimed to make sure that Iran could not rebuild its forces or relish its weapons after the war.¹⁴ This method has been a direct reaction to the emergence of

¹² Nazir and Mushtaq, "Operation Epic Fury."

¹³ Jocalyn Clark, "Peace, Come Closer," Editor's Choice, *BMJ* 392 (March 2026): s480, <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.s480>.

¹⁴ Project Muse, "Project MUSE," *The Middle East Journal* 79, no. 2 (2026), <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/119/article/988810>.

the concept of precise mass, in which a foe can create great masses of cheap precision weapons, such as drones, which can overwhelm conventional defenses.

Such a huge operation has, however, illuminated the infirmities of the U.S. defense industrial base when it comes to its logistical continuity. The interceptors, including the Standard Missile-3 and the Patriot Advanced Capability-3, have also been said to have an unsustainable burn rate. The rate of production of missiles and drones per month is about 100 in Iran, compared to 1 or 2 of the expensive interceptors needed by the coalition to shoot down the missiles.¹⁵ This discrepancy pitfall compelled the Pentagon to send air defense systems deployed in South Korea to the Middle East, which could undermine deterrence in other arenas.¹⁶ The focus of the future war is that counter-industrial warfare should be backed by a strong and resilient manufacturing industry in the domestic market that can match the production of the adversary on the offensive.

The bombings of Iranian industries, such as its fuel depots and power grid, were also indications to move towards a total war. The breach of the Tehran fuel depot by a strike was dubbed as ecocide by the Iranian authorities, and the ignition of the national power grid in Iraq after strikes in the area showed the spillover effects of multi-domain warfare.¹⁷ The systematic annihilation of the power of the Iranian defense industrial complex is an attempt to eliminate the mass problem, sacrificing the local economic infrastructure to it. With the war still going on, the interest is now switched to whether the coalition will be able to destroy sufficient strategic infrastructure before its own ammunition runs out, such that a diplomatic deal is driven to their surrender.

The Legal Dispute

The international law experts and the United Nations have greatly denounced the use of force as a clear violation of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter that explicitly forbids the use of force, which has been seen in the case of Operation Epic Fury.¹⁸ Several factors have contributed to the operation being described by many as an unwarranted, risky military action, given that there

¹⁵ Celeo Ramirez, *The Blogs: The Battle for Isfahan's Uranium Is About to Begin*, n.d., accessed April 20, 2026, <https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/the-battle-for-isfahans-uranium-is-about-to-begin/>.

¹⁶ k Davit, "Operation Epic Fury, Regime Change, and the Collapse of Legal Constraint," *CIP*, April 12, 2022, <https://internationalpolicy.org/publications/epic-fury-international-law/>.

¹⁷ Nazir and Mushtaq, "Operation Epic Fury"; Haseeb Ahmad Khattak, "AI Warfare and Strategic Lessons from Gaza and Operation Epic Fury," *Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research*, March 20, 2026, <https://cscr.pk/explore/themes/defense-security/ai-warfare-and-strategic-lessons-from-gaza-and-operation-epic-fury/>.

¹⁸ Maastricht University, "International Law Discussion Group: Operation Epic Fury and Its Implications for International Law - Maastricht University," 2026, <https://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/nl/node/66208>.

was not, nor is there an imminent armed force with the potential to cause Article 51 to be invoked as a defense.¹⁹ Besides, even the alleged U.S. intention to regime change is, in itself, a breach of the traditional system of non-intervention and the safeguarding of so-called political independence. The absence of UN Security Council authorization, or congressional approval in the U.S., has further underscored the doctrine of disruption that the administration embraces and views international law as a procedural nuisance as opposed to a restraint.

The humanitarian nature of the war has been brought into withering concern, where it comes to the breach of international humanitarian law (IHL) as well.²⁰ The attack on the Minab main school and the civilian infrastructures, such as water desalination plants and power grids, have been mentioned as possibly unwarranted attacks. The ultimatum issued by Secretary Hegseth to IRGC members of the option to die a natural death, was, according to legal experts, a breach of the ban on repeating that no quarter will be given.²¹ Such moves lead to the degradation of the basic norms safeguarding the civilians and combatants and threaten to create a vicious cycle of instability in the Middle East.

The long-term effect of it being in disregard of the law is that the mighty states will establish the new norm of operation after they can apply lethal force anywhere, to everyone, to unilaterally established purposes. With this precedent in place, other world and regional superpowers, such as China and Russia, can emulate it to justify their own military actions.²² The future of the UN Charter system, based on global condemnation and expenses to aggressors, is now in a balancing act. Operation Epic Fury can be remembered not only as a war operation, but also as the place where the legal order, which existed after WWII, started to collapse.

¹⁹ ISIS, “New Activity at the Esfahan Nuclear Complex | ISIS Reports | Institute For Science And International Security,” accessed April 20, 2026, <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/new-activity-at-the-esfahan-nuclear-complex>.

²⁰ William J. Broad, “An Iranian Nuclear Site Avoids New Airstrikes, for Now,” World, *The New York Times*, March 3, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/03/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-site-isfahan-airstrikes-spared.html>; David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, Spencer Faragasso, and the Good ISIS Team, “Comprehensive Updated Assessment of Iranian Nuclear Sites Five Months After the 12-Day War | ISIS Reports | Institute For Science And International Security,” accessed April 20, 2026, <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/comprehensive-updated-assessment-of-iranian-nuclear-sites-five-months-after-the-12-day-war>.

²¹ The US Central Command, “U.S. Central Command | Operation Epic Fury.”

²² Asma Musharaf and Associate Professor Dr Naseem Akhter, “A Comparative Study of Great Power Conflicts and Islamic Principles of Jihad and Diplomacy,” ` 5, no. 2 (2026): 92–101; Ramirez, *The Blogs*; Galbraith, “United States Bombs Iran’s Nuclear Facilities.”

Way Forward:

The resulting impact of Operation Epic Fury in the region has radically changed the security paradigm of the Persian Gulf and brought to an end decades of fragile rapprochement between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. This Iranian response of launching more than 2,000 missiles and drones, targeted not only Israel and the U.S. bases, but also oil and energy infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE, and Kuwait, which is critical to the countries. The attack on the largest gas field in the world, South Pars in Iran, resulted in seemingly retaliatory attacks against the largest Qatar gas and liquid terminal, Ras Laffan, whose damage was far-reaching and shook the global energy market.²³

Brent crude also increased to more than 110 per barrel as an indication that the oil and LNG exports, which are 20 percent of the global output, pass through the Strait of Hormuz and are at a greater risk.

The diplomatic impact has been the most powerful; however, the normalization between China and Saudi Arabia that was brokered in 2023 has been destroyed. The GCC states, which had been trying to harmonize their security relationship with Washington against overtures towards Tehran, have had no option but to enter the fray.²⁴ The attacks on civilian targets by the Iranians, similar to the one on the girls' school and the luxury hotels in Dubai, were meant to pressure the Iranian forces into coercing these countries to pressure Washington to back down. Rather, they have enabled the more regional shift towards a more, not only interconnected air and missile defense infrastructure, which might lead to Israeli dovish Saudi normalization as a defensive measure against a weakened yet desperate Iran.

The war has also resulted in a geopolitical test to China, whose balancing act of economic and diplomatic acts within the territory has been put to the test. The overall strategic alliance between China and Iran has also failed to protect it against the economic impacts of the war, as it has had to substitute Gulf oil blockades with more costly Russian imports at the cost of compromising its energy sovereignty.²⁵ Although Beijing and Washington have an interest in having a non-nuclear Iran, they completely differ when it comes to the use of force and regime

²³ Clark, "Peace, Come Closer"; ALCON, "Operation Epic Fury Explained," 2026, <https://www.alconintel.com/newsletters/global-intelligence-update/posts/operation-epic-fury-a-primer-and-outlook>.

²⁴ Kyoichi Sasazawa, "Geological Constraints on Bunker-Buster Penetration at Iran's Fordow Facility," SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 6193060 (Social Science Research Network, February 6, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.6193060>; ISIS, "New Activity at the Esfahan Nuclear Complex | ISIS Reports | Institute For Science And International Security."

²⁵ Saira Bano, "U.S. and Israeli Strikes on Iran Could Fuel a New Wave of Nuclear Proliferation," *The Conversation*, July 14, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.64628/AAM.xegemayx7>; Ramirez, *The Blogs*.

change. This disintegration of the global reaction guarantees that the regional order post-war is going to be made based on unilateral warfare results, as opposed to inter-regional agreement.