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THE EPIC FURY OF THE LION'S ROAR:

A MILITARY ANALYSIS OF THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

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Israeli-US Military Operations

On the morning of Saturday, 28 February 2026, starting at 10:12 Tehran time (07:42 CET), the Israeli Air Force (IAF) and the US forces deployed in the Area of Responsibility (AoR) of US Central Command (USCENTCOM) launched a coordinated military action against the Islamic Republic of Iran, which immediately took the form of a massive campaign of air and long-range bombardments. The campaign, the result of long planning and conducted in full synchronization, unfolded through an Israeli operation, officially named Roaring Lion and announced by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) at 10:57, and a US action, named Operation Epic Fury and announced by the Pentagon at 12:09. Although operating in close collaboration, however, the two countries pursued distinct sets of objectives from the outset: the United States focused their activities on degrading Iran's military capabilities and military-industrial complex, with particular reference to the missile segment, nuclear facilities, naval infrastructure and air defense systems; Israel, on the other hand, stated that it aimed to remove the existential threat posed by Tehran, focusing on political and military leadership, missile sites in western Iran, and Command and Control (C2) facilities.

In this context, the first wave of attacks carried out by the IAF on Saturday morning consisted of strikes aimed at disrupting Iran's security and military apparatus and neutralizing its top institutional leaders. The initial attack, claimed to be the largest in the history of the IAF, involved a total of around 200 aircraft, mainly *F-35I Adir* and *F-16I Sufa* multi-role fighters, the latter equipped with Air-Launched Ballistic Missiles (ALBMs), several boosters of which were found in western Iraq, and supported by *KC-707 Re'em* tankers for in-flight refueling over Syria, reportedly struck up to 500 separate targets almost simultaneously, in conjunction with US *BGM-109 Tomahawk* cruise missiles. ALBMs, in particular, had already been used by Israel in the previous operations Days of Repentance (October 2024), Rising Lion (June 2025) and Summit of Fire (September 2025) to neutralize air defense systems and strike High-Value Targets (HVT) deep inside enemy territory without exposing manned aircraft. Despite this, however, it is considered plausible that during the operation the *F-35I Adir* assets, by virtue of their stealth characteristics, were deployed from the outset in a stand-in role in

conjunction with stand-off attacks. Overall, observation of the activities conducted by Israel makes it possible to place them in line with the lessons learned from past operations, particularly during the Twelve-Day War, in which similar stand-off strikes with ALBMs were recorded as part of a campaign of Suppression and Destruction of Enemy Air Defenses (SEAD/DEAD) aimed at creating a safe corridor for crewed aircraft to be employed in stand-in mode. Specifically, this approach was replicated in a timely manner by the IAF during Operation Roaring Lion as well, where from the very first day efforts were made to open such an aerial corridor toward Tehran and over the city itself, an objective that was later openly declared achieved on Sunday evening, thereby reducing reliance on stand-off munitions and enabling large-scale bombing campaigns against Iranian institutional targets.

Figure 1 – F-16I Sufa fighters engaged in the launch of air-launched ballistic missiles (ALBMs) in the early stages of the conflict.

Tehran was therefore immediately identified as a priority target for the IAF, which, starting at 10:12, first struck University Street and the Jomhuori area and then the compound of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Intelligence, the headquarters of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran and the Parchin military complex. The first confirmations of the high-profile figures neutralized came in the late afternoon, when the names of Defense Minister Aziz Nasirzadeh, Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Seyed

Abdolrahim Mousavi, Personal Representative of the Supreme Leader in the Defense Council Ali Shamkhani, and Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Ali Shamkhani were reported. As for the Supreme Leader, following initial rumors that he had been taken to a safe haven, from 15:37 onwards his status began to appear uncertain due to the extent of the damage caused to his compound, which was hit by around 30 munitions. Later that evening, news of his probable elimination was released by Israel (23:10) and the United States (23:45 and 00:35), and then definitively confirmed by the Iranian authorities on the morning of Sunday, March 1. Overall, the decision to launch the Saturday attacks in the late morning, rather than during the nighttime hours traditionally preferred, was plausibly driven by the availability of real-time intelligence on the Supreme Leader's location, a highly time-sensitive opportunity that would have required bringing the operational window forward.

At the same time, the deterioration of Iran's military and military-industrial capabilities involved both US forces, specifically the US Air Force (USAF) and the US Navy, and, at a later stage, the IAF, which also carried out strikes against Hezbollah in Iqlim al-Tuffah, in Lebanon, and against Kataib Hezbollah in Baghdad, with the aim of disrupting their C2 structures. While the initial Israeli attacks focused on the Tehran area to decapitate Iran's institutional leadership, the targets hit by the US were more widely distributed throughout the country, in at least 24 of the 32 provinces, and included numerous cities, including Kermanshah, Lorestan, Tabriz, Isfahan, Karaj, Ilam and Urmia. In this first phase, many of the attacks carried out were aimed at degrading and destroying what remained of Iran's air defenses, so that manned aircraft could subsequently operate safely in enemy airspace. In this context, the breadth of the target list, at least 130 geographical targets spread across the entire national territory, meant that it was necessary to make consistent and continuous use of Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance and Target Acquisition (ISTAR) assets, which are particularly necessary for the detection, identification and dynamic tracking of mobile ballistic missile launchers, in order to prevent their operational deployment and at the same time support allied air defense architectures. In addition to SEAD/DEAD activities, several production

and logistics sites linked to the missile and drone sector, ammunition depots, C2 nodes and installations connected to the Iranian military-industrial chain were also attacked.

Figure 2 – Graphical representation of the effects of aerial bombing.

The targets also included several fortified underground facilities linked to the IRGC's ballistic missile capabilities, one of which was hit at 14:15 in eastern Iran. In this regard, a particularly significant development occurred as the first night of operations approached. While movements of US tanker aircraft had already been detected near Gibraltar at 22:06, at 00:00 there was a peak of activity around the Lajes base in the Azores, from which five *KC-46 Pegasus* aircraft took off within a few minutes. These signs led to speculation about the imminent deployment of *B-2 Spirit* strategic bombers, equipped with advanced stealth capabilities and capable of carrying significant conventional payloads, including penetrating bombs suitable for underground structures. Subsequently, at 19:36 on Sunday, nighttime strikes were officially confirmed as having been carried out by four assets of this type that took off from Whiteman Air Force Base in Missouri, during which several deeply buried mountain facilities were struck using a total of 64 *GBU-31(V)3/B Joint Direct Attack Munition* (JDAM) 900-kilogram high-penetration bombs. It is interesting

to note that these were employed instead of the *GBU-57A/B Massive Ordnance Penetrator* (MOP) bombs that had been used in the previous Operation Midnight Hammer in June 2025, a choice dictated by their lighter weight and the consequently greater number that could be transported, factors consistent with the high number and wide dispersion of targets to be hit during a single sortie. A strike of a similar nature in terms of the operational methods adopted was then recorded during the night between Sunday and Monday. On the morning of March 2, USCENTCOM announced the deployment of three *B-1B Lancer* strategic bombers that took off from Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota to degrade Iran's ballistic missile capabilities by destroying assets and elements of the country's missile industry. Although the type of munitions used is unknown, it is worth noting that the *B-1B* has the largest payload of any US bomber in active service. This, together with the fact that it is not classified as a stealth aircraft, suggests that a transition is underway from the penetration bombing that characterizes the SEAD/DEAD phase to high-volume fire following the neutralization of enemy defenses. In this sense, the announcement made by the United Kingdom on Sunday evening that it would make several military bases available to the United States for attack operations against Iran is significant. Among these, Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and Fairford in the United Kingdom stand out for their usefulness, as they can be used as potential forward operating bases for US strategic bombers, which would allow for their more systematic use in the conflict without the need for very long-range sorties.

In this context, during the second day of operations, the USAF and US Navy maintained a relatively low sortie rate compared to their Israeli counterparts, with attacks continuing to focus primarily on gaining air supremacy through extensive SEAD/DEAD activity, while simultaneously continuing to destroy Iranian military sites and the military-industrial complex, as the IAF remained engaged in neutralizing Iranian Medium-Range Ballistic Missile (MRBM) launchers in support of air defense activities. Within the SEAD/DEAD framework, in particular, it is noteworthy that Israeli-US strikes are also systematically annihilating Tehran's remaining aircraft while they are still stationed on the ground, including *F-4 Phantom*, *F-5 Tiger* and *MIG-29 Fulcrum* assets. At 00:20 on

Monday morning, USCENTCOM released an updated operational assessment of the first two days of the campaign, claiming to have neutralized approximately 1,000 targets. Overall, however, currently and likely for the next two to three days, USAF, US Navy and IAF operations are expected to follow a calibrated daily rhythm, alternating large-scale sorties with tactical pauses in order to ensure logistical and maintenance sustainability and to allow for continuous assessment of the situation on the ground. In operational terms, the main limiting factor for the overall duration of the campaign is the availability of air-to-surface and surface-to-air ammunition. Despite this, it is reported that the US armed forces have exploited the conflict to deploy for the first time in combat several newly designed assets developed for long-range targeting. These include, first and foremost, the new *Precision Strike Missile* (PrSM) Short-Range Ballistic Missile (SRBM), which entered operational service only about two years ago and represents the latest evolution of the US Army's long-range precision strike capability. Its use therefore marked the operational debut of a munition designed to gradually replace the *MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System* (ATACMS), extending its range, accuracy and flexibility of use from the *M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System* (HIMARS) and *M270 Multiple Launch Rocket System* (MLRS) ground platforms. Another asset tested in the field for the first time was the long-range attack drones (OWA-UAV – One-Way Attack Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) *Low-cost Unmanned Combat Attack System* (LUCAS), inspired by the Iranian *Shahed-136* and launched from the ground by Task Force Scorpion Strike, which has only been part of USCENTCOM since December 2025.

Figure 3 – F-35I Adir aircrafts carrying out SEAD/DEAD activities deep inside enemy territory.

At the same time, to conclude the overview of the Israeli-US offensive, another factor that accompanied the operations from the early stages, generating particularly incisive effects, was the use of cyberattacks against the Islamic Republic. Initially, at around 11:22, several Iranian news sites were targeted, including the state news agency. Subsequently, the action expanded both in terms of scope and intensity, leading to a rapid interruption of Internet connectivity in the Country: starting around 11:58, by 12:17 the disconnection had already affected the entire Iranian territory, contributing to the rapid and effective disruption of Iranian C2 architectures.

Iranian Retaliation

As an immediate reaction to the attack, the Iranian authorities closed the national airspace at 10:45. The kinetic response followed shortly thereafter between 11:44 and 11:56, when the IDF, which had already activated sirens throughout Israel at 10:13 and formally declared a state of emergency at 10:26, reported the arrival of a first salvo of missiles, followed by several others in the following hours, which, however, did not follow a structured pattern. As a matter of fact, although initially

directed primarily against Israel and a number of US military bases in the Middle East, with the progressive erosion of Tehran's longer-range arsenals, particularly with the depletion of MRBMs and SRBMs, they increasingly focused on a widespread campaign against symbolic targets, without taking into account the use of saturation tactics. From this point of view, it seems that Tehran had carefully planned a scenario of existential threat to the Islamic Republic, drawing on the experience gained from the Twelve-Day War. In this sense, it had arranged command rotations, redundancies and decentralised automatic retaliatory measures to preserve operational capability in the event of serious disruptions to the command chain. Indeed, the disruption of the Iranian C2 structure by Israel, although not complete, given that the President of the Republic, Masoud Pezeshkian, and other prominent figures such as the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Ali Larijani, were spared, it undeniably compromised the Iranian military's ability to mount a coordinated response. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the Iranian institutional apparatus has so far proved capable of resisting the Israeli-US decapitation attempt by implementing contingency plans specifically developed to ensure that a general control of the war effort is maintained.

Overall, the plausible intent of Iran's all-out war response is to regionalise the conflict in order to generate sufficient economic and financial instability, with global repercussions, to force the Arab Countries in the area, in particular, but not only, to leverage for a cessation of hostilities. With this in mind, attacks have also been carried out against a significant number of Countries in the region, whose civilian areas have proved to be much more vulnerable than US military installations and the national territory of Israel.

During the first phase of Iran's retaliation, the primary targets struck by a variety of missiles and OWA UAVs included, in addition to Israel itself, numerous US military bases, including the Al Udeid air base in Qatar (12:28), the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet in the Juffair area of Bahrain (12:32), Ali Al-Salem Air Base in Kuwait (12:43), Al-Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates (12:43) and Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia (13:13). Starting at 14:03, numerous additional waves of Iranian missiles and drones followed, striking not only Israel, where

damage was also caused by debris from the interceptors, but also Qatar (Doha), the United Arab Emirates (Dubai and several areas around Abu Dhabi), Kuwait (Kuwait City), Bahrain (Manama) and Oman (Duqm). On Monday, several OWA UAVs were also shot down near the British air base at Akrotiri near Limassol, Cyprus. In general, on Sunday morning (09:30), Israel stated that in the first 24 hours of the conflict Iran had launched a total of approximately 150 ballistic missiles against its territory, slightly fewer than the number recorded on the first night of the Twelve-Day War.

At the same time, Iran's regional escalation of the conflict has also made it necessary for the Gulf States to intervene directly to ensure the defense of their airspace. In this context, official bulletins published by the Ministries of Defense of various Countries in the region have made it possible to extrapolate two important pieces of information: the actual extent of Iran's long-range targeting and the effectiveness of the air defense architectures of the attacked States. However, analysis of this information reveals a significantly fragmented picture due to the lack of uniformity in the information made public by the various Countries. From this point of view, there is a noticeable gap between the number of assets detected and those shot down, with the latter outnumbering the former in the case of drones. For this reason, it is plausible that the total number of carriers detected is actually higher than that officially declared. Overall, however, despite the incompleteness of the data, the scale of Iran's attacks in the region is clearly evident, involving several hundred missiles, predominantly ballistic, and more than a thousand OWA UAVs.

Country	Missiles detected	Missiles shot down	Drones detected	Drones shot down
UAE	182	169	689	645
Kuwait	-	97	-	283
Bahrain	-	70	-	76
Qatar	101	101	39	24
Jordan	-	13	-	49
Saudi Arabia	-	-	-	8
Israel	170*	-	-	-
Total	**453**	**450**	**728**	**1085**

** The number refers only to the Iranian missiles detected by Israel during the first 24 hours of the conflict.*

Comparative analysis of Iranian long-range assets launched versus those neutralised.

At the same time, Iran's reactions were also strongly linked to what was described during Secretary of War Pete Hegseth's press conference at the Pentagon on Monday morning as one of the key elements, along with missile and nuclear targets, of the US-led Southern Front, namely Iran's naval capabilities, particularly in relation to their potential use in closing the Strait of Hormuz. This was indeed feared by the IRGC as early as 18.50 on Saturday, when numerous Very High Frequency (VHF) transmissions were sent out prohibiting any vessel from crossing the Strait. However, in the hours following the announcement, naval traffic continued to be recorded in the area, making it clear that Iran was having difficulty implementing its statements at a practical level. In this context, the US attempt to prevent any Iranian mining operations in the Strait of Hormuz by targeting several Artesh and IRGC naval bases in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, particularly those in Konarak and Bandar Abbas, takes on particular significance. Confirmed losses include an Iranian *Moudge*-class corvette (known as *Jamaran* in the West), the IRIS *Shahid Bagheri* drone carrier, the IRIS *Makran* forward operating base ship, several *Bayandor*-class corvettes and three *Alvand*-class Iranian frigates, among the largest and most sophisticated ships in the Iranian Navy, which has been severely disrupted overall, including in its C2 centres. In this context, although there has been no actual closure of the Strait, it should be noted that Iran's indiscriminate targeting campaign has nevertheless had serious consequences for maritime traffic in the area. As a matter of fact, by midnight on Sunday at least five civilian oil tankers had been hit by Iranian drones or missiles in the Strait and the Persian Gulf, namely the *Skylight* (flag of Palau), *Ocean Electra* (flag of India), *MKD Vyom* (flag of the Marshall Islands), *Hercules Star* (flag of Spain) and *Stena Imperative* (US flag). The damage to the energy sector was exacerbated by the closure of several refineries, including the Saudi Arabian Ras Tanura refinery and QatarEnergy's offshore LNG production facilities, which were hit by Iranian attacks. Finally, the tensions surrounding the situation in the Strait of Hormuz also include the Houthis' declaration concerning the closure of the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb, which, however, has not been followed by any concrete action so far.

Figure 4 – BGM-109 Tomahawk cruise missiles in their final approach to port infrastructure.

In parallel, in addition to the likely attempt to translate the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz into military terms, there is also the risk of specific acts of irregular warfare, including bombings, violent unrest and cyberattacks, against Israeli-US targets in a broad sense, even outside the region. The attempted assaults on the Green Zone in Baghdad and the US Consulate in Karachi could be an early warning sign of this threat. This scenario is further confirmed by the US decision to raise the alert level (FPCON - Force Protection Condition) for its military bases to Charlie, the second highest on the scale and corresponding to an imminent but non-specific risk situation. At the same time, it is reported that the US embassies in Kuwait City (Kuwait) and Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) were also targeted in the wide-ranging Iranian attacks.

Conclusions and Outlook

In conclusion, the overall present scenario is characterized by the imminent completion of SEAD/DEAD operations. In this sense, the recording of the take-off of 17 US tanker aircraft *en route* to the Middle East on the morning of Tuesday, March 3, is the clearest sign yet of an imminent intensification of the air campaign. With SEAD/DEAD operations at an advanced stage and British bases now available, it is likely that there will be significant targeting by strategic bombers in the next 12 hours, which would allow for a significantly higher volume of firepower than has been seen in previous days. This is a dynamic that is likely to be repeated in the following nights in order to maximize both the number of targets hit and the level of destruction of those targets, accelerating the generation of the kinetic effects defined in the planning phase on the long target list designated at the same time. In terms of the duration of the operations, however, if the stated objective is to degrade Iran's military-industrial potential, this is a result that requires a campaign of at least three weeks at the current rate of sorties. This scenario would also necessitate constant reassessment, since Bomb Damage Assessment (BDA) is necessarily delayed when dealing with such a large number of targets spread across a vast theater at a high operational tempo. Finally, the issue of Iran's enriched uranium reserves remains unresolved. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), approximately 441 kilograms at 60% enrichment are still present in the Country. Securing and, if necessary, removing these stocks is a reasonable priority to minimize proliferation risks, a task that is unlikely to be accomplished through airstrikes alone without active Iranian cooperation.

The ultimate joint objective of the two operations, therefore, appears to be a regime change. Although Epic Fury aims to neutralize Iran's current and future missile capabilities, destroy its naval forces, deny Tehran the possibility of developing a military nuclear program and ultimately prevent it from supporting other aligned militias in the region, when combined with the profound institutional disarticulation perpetrated by Roaring Lion, it creates the conditions for a collapse of the established state order. On the other hand, there are no concrete indicators as to how and when this would translate into institutional subversion: there

are no significant protests on the ground, nor are there any signs of a fifth column. The scenario that seems most likely to unfold is rather the emergence, precisely because of the context of war, of a military figure oriented towards maximalist positions. In the absence of the emergence of hetero-directed and complacent leadership, the conflict is therefore increasingly taking on the contours of a war of attrition, mainly involving air and missile strikes. Although this dynamic could significantly erode Iran's offensive potential, it may not be sufficient on its own to bring about a regime change. The continuation and evolution of hostilities appear to be linked above all to the size of the regional arsenals of all the actors actively or passively involved in the conflict and their respective ability to sustain the logistical and operational effort over time.

AUTHORS

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