



# U.S.-Israel Joint Operations Against Iran's Regime

**Jonathan Ruhe**  
*Fellow for American Strategy*

**Ari Cicurel**  
*Associate Director of Foreign Policy*

At its outset, the joint U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran's regime is entirely different than past rounds of conflict in terms of objectives, operations, and Iranian responses. In the face of unprecedentedly close coordination between the United States and Israel that seeks much more maximal goals than last year's 12-Day War, Iran is attempting to avoid losing the war by broadening it and showing it can sustain missile and drone fire.

## Objectives

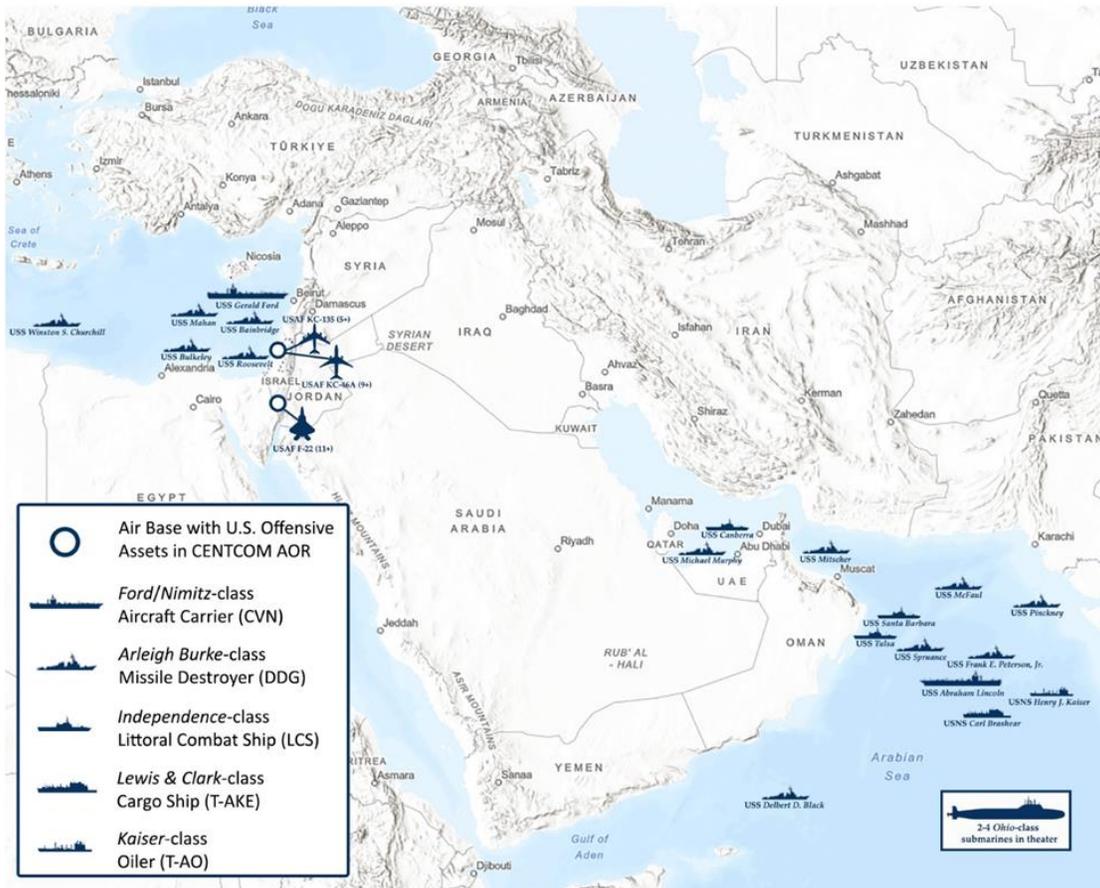
President Donald Trump's statement early on February 28 indicates much more [expansive goals](#) for Operation Epic Fury than last summer's Operation Midnight Hammer against Iran's nuclear sites. In addition to ensuring Tehran "does not obtain a nuclear weapon," U.S. operations seek to "destroy [Iran's] missiles and raze their missile industry to the ground[,] annihilate their navy," and "ensure the region's terrorist proxies can no longer destabilize the region or the world." In parallel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stated [Israeli operations](#) aim "to put an end to the threat from the Ayatollah regime in Iran" and missile forces that threaten Israel.

Statements by officials from both countries suggest that, by targeting the regime's leadership, internal security apparatus, and military capabilities, the United States and Israel seek to create permissive conditions, "when we are finished," for the Iranian people to "take over your government," in President Trump's words. Eliminating the regime's ability to threaten both its own people and the region goes well beyond Israel's limited objectives, comparatively speaking, to degrade Tehran's military command and control (C2), nuclear, and missile arsenals in the 12-Day War—and even further beyond U.S. follow-on efforts against Iran's enrichment-related facilities last summer.

## Operations

Coupled with these statements, unfolding events indicate a more ambitious target set, more intense strikes, and closer U.S.-Israeli coordination on prewar planning and wartime operations than ever before. President Trump reportedly pushed his advisors for [decisive](#) military options, and the timing of the strikes reflects, among other things, the time needed to first amass significant U.S. forces in the region and refine the intricate planning that attends complex and large-scale operations. A senior Israeli military official said "many weeks" of [joint planning](#) with the United States preceded the operation: "What we are seeing right now, in recent hours and probably in the coming days, is a level of coordination ... that has not been seen before. This is something that has been planned for weeks and close, close coordination all the way from our bosses, the chief of staff, and U.S. Central Command [CENTCOM] commander, down to the low ranks.

# U.S. Offensive Force Posture in the Middle East (February 2026)



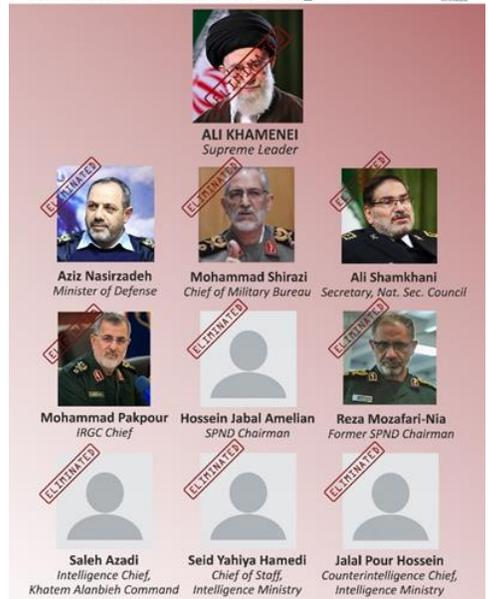
Significant elements of the prewar preparations and opening U.S.-Israeli strikes include:

- The first-ever operational [deployment](#) of U.S. combat aircraft (F-22) and aerial refueling tankers (KC-46, KC-135) to Israel earlier this week. This added a U.S. Air Force (USAF) strike option to the preexisting buildup of U.S. Navy (USN) assets in the region, including two carrier strike groups as well as guided missile destroyers and attack submarines.
- The unprecedented scale of IAF operations, combined with the unmatched scale of U.S. operations, corresponds with the campaign’s broad and ambitious objectives:
  - The IAF’s opening attack wave is reportedly the [largest operation](#) in its history, involving roughly 200 combat aircraft employing hundreds of air-to-ground munitions against approximately 500 targets.
  - The largest U.S. military buildup in the region in decades now enables heavy and wide-ranging strikes. This includes capabilities unique to the United States, such as long-range Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles (TLAM), carrier-based combat and electronic warfare (EW) aircraft, airborne early warning platforms, and—for the first time— Low-Cost Uncrewed Combat Attack System (LUCAS) one-way [attack drones](#) reengineered from Iranian Shahed drones.
  - The USAF tanker deployment to Israel serves as a force multiplier in light of the Israeli Air Force’s (IAF) severely limited and obsolescing tanker fleet, enabling

higher sortie rates and endurance for F-15, F-16, F-22, and F-35 aircraft—both U.S. and Israeli—operating from Israel and potentially elsewhere in the broader region.

- The ability of Israel and the United States to achieve tactical surprise and, in Israel’s case, expand the focus of its decapitation strikes to include not just military commanders, as it did last June, but also top regime officials.
  - Israel reportedly struck multiple [gatherings](#) of top officials, aiming to [eliminate](#) 30 key leaders, including [Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei](#), his closest security advisers, and potential successors, and several top IRGC commanders (see graphic).
  - This reflects Israel’s proven abilities to achieve tactical surprise with long-range strikes, penetrate Iran’s intelligence apparatus, and conduct covert operations that complicate decision-making in the fog of war and advertise regime weaknesses to the Iranian people.
  - Achieving tactical surprise is even more impressive in the wake of a conspicuous weeks-long force buildup, explicit warnings from the Trump administration, and the clear consequences of Iran’s failure to detect IAF decapitation strikes last June.
- The broad sweep of Iranian military infrastructure targeted by U.S.-Israeli operations, focused foremost on Iran’s air defenses and immediate retaliatory capabilities:
  - One U.S. official claimed strikes had “effectively suppressed” Iranian air defenses. Iran’s air defenses likely were limited to begin with, since systems were heavily degraded by Israel last June and took lower priority than missiles in Tehran’s postwar reconstitution efforts.
  - Strikes were reported on Iranian naval and air assets around the Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, including naval and air bases, surface combatants, and radars.
  - The IAF indicated it is [prioritizing](#) Iran’s medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) mobile launchers, known as transporter erector launchers (TEL), in an effort to degrade Iran’s launch capacity and frequency as quickly as possible. This follows Iran’s approach from the 12-Day War, when TELs formed a vulnerable chokepoint in its MRBM launch capacity.
  - Alongside kinetic strikes, Iran’s semi-official media reported a major [cyberattack](#) that targeted several Iranian media outlets during the opening U.S.-Israeli operation.

**Key Iranian Regime Officials Eliminated on February 28**



## Iran’s Response

The Iranian regime’s initial retaliation has been much more rapid, far-ranging, and intense than in previous, much more limited conflicts with the United States and Israel. Because the regime is weaker than ever before internally—following setbacks to its nuclear program and unprecedented protests earlier this year—its best hope is to sustain its retaliatory fire and widen the

conflict. By raising the specter of an open-ended and uncontrollable conflagration, it intends to build diplomatic pressure on the United States and Israel to cease operations, deny them decisive operational results, and strain their stocks of air and missile defense interceptors.

To accomplish this, the regime is reaching for its most capable and plentiful [missile and drone arsenals](#). The regime genuinely believes its missile attacks ensured survival in its existential war with Iraq in the 1980s, and that they compelled President Trump to end the 12-Day War. On the eve of conflict, Iran possessed some 2,000 MRBMs—roughly the same number as before the 12-Day War—and thousands more short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM), cruise missiles, and attack drones threatening the Gulf. With its back to the wall, it has every incentive to unleash these capabilities to the most sustainable extent possible.

Just as the United States and Israel conducted rigorous prewar planning, so too did Iran. After the IRGC’s missile C2 was decapitated in a stroke at the start of the 12-Day War, Iranian forces [pre-delegated](#) authorities and dispersed capabilities for mass missile and drone salvos. They also devoted the months preceding the current conflict to fortifying nuclear and military sites, and exercising naval, coastal defense, and air defense units.

Already, Iran is carrying out its prewar threats to target U.S. bases throughout the Gulf with its short-range capabilities, and to again target Israel with drones and MRBMs. The first day alone indicates that Iran’s approach is categorically different than its telegraphed, small-scale, and one-off ballistic missile attacks on U.S. forces at Qatar’s Al-Udeid Airbase last June and at Iraq’s Ain Al Asad Airbase in January 2020. Initial attacks also reflect Iran’s proven ability, both between and amid conflicts, to adjust its missile and drone strike packages and tactics in order to sustain launch rates and complicate U.S.-Israeli defenses.

According to JINSA’s initial estimates, Iran has conducted at least 26 separate waves of missile and drone attacks since the outset of hostilities (see chart). As in the June 2025 conflict, these waves included MRBM and drone strikes targeting Israel. Iran reportedly has fired at least [150 MRBMs](#) and dozens of drones at Israel already, compared to some 100 MRBMs in the corresponding period last June. There are indications it may have employed [cluster munitions](#) in at least some of these strikes. Simultaneously, it has attacked U.S. military installations at Al-Udeid Airbase in Qatar (as it did last June), and expanded this target set to include U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain, Ali al-Salam Air Base in Kuwait, Al-Dhafra Airbase in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other targets in those countries as well as Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Reflecting the [operational lessons](#) of the 12-Day War, Iran appears to have dispersed its fire throughout the day in order to sustain its launch rates and complicate air and missile defense operations.

