



Epic Fury II: Securing U.S. Objectives in Iran





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I. Introduction

In the operation's opening hours on February 28, President Trump laid out Epic Fury's goals to eliminate Iran's nuclear weapons and missile programs.¹ U.S. objectives now include reestablishing freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz. These goals have not yet been met, but they can be. To achieve its objectives, the United States should return to military operations.

The current ceasefire, blockade, and prospect of a "memorandum of understanding" cannot reliably compel Iran to accede to U.S. demands, at least at acceptable cost to U.S. interests. As implicit in Iran's offer of talks predicated on the United States loosening its blockade, the regime seeks immediate advantage for itself without any indication of actually agreeing to major U.S. demands. Its plan is as it has been in endless rounds of negotiations across multiple U.S. administrations: to appear amenable, agree to nothing, drag out talks, erode U.S. resolve, and use the time to strengthen itself.

Already, Tehran has made clear that major U.S. objectives are off the table. Rather than credibly, fully, and permanently dismantle its nuclear program, Iran insists that that it has a right to enrich uranium, with only a temporary suspension, not an end, to its nuclear program on the table. Other U.S. objectives cannot be achieved diplomatically at all. Making a deal to reopen the Strait of Hormuz would be tantamount to acknowledging Iranian control of the vital waterway, an unacceptable proposition. Indeed, Iran's seemingly benevolent offer to allow maritime traffic through during negotiations is actually an assertion that the Strait of Hormuz is its domain to control, oversee, and reopen only when it decides.

It is time, therefore, for the United States, Israel, and its Gulf partners to launch Operation Epic Fury 2. For its center of gravity, this renewed military campaign should target the Iranian regime's conviction it will outlast and overpressure the United States through diplomatic, economic, and military confrontation. Fully enforcing the U.S. blockade, forcibly ending Iran's threat to shipping through the Strait, degrading the regime's retaliatory capabilities, and undermining its internal coercive apparatus are core to this campaign. Countervalue strikes, like those reportedly under consideration by the White House, threaten mostly to undermine these goals by spurring Iranian escalation, with potentially catastrophic consequences, against desalination and power plants across the Gulf.

In and of themselves, these operations are unlikely to attain the entirety of U.S. objectives. But by ending Iran's control of Hormuz, and by undermining key props of its internal control and external aggression, Epic Fury 2 removes the regime's most immediately threatening capabilities and fosters the best possible conditions for an acceptable solution to its nuclear weapons program.

II. Invalidating Iran's Theory of Victory

Believing it withstood the worst its enemies could throw at it, Iran's regime seeks to cement its wartime control over passage through the Strait of Hormuz as a vital source of leverage and revenues, and it seeks to retain its core arsenals for deterrence and power projection. To these ends, it wants the United States to recognize its self-proclaimed "rights" to both the Strait and expansive atomic infrastructure, and to end its counterblockade. The regime hopes to coerce this outcome by convincing the United States, the Iranian people, and the wider world that it is unbroken by its severe losses in recent combat and able and willing to inflict greater pain, for longer, than its opponents can endure or inflict in return. At the same time, its offers to end the dueling blockades, while punting on nuclear talks, suggests that the regime's outward defiance could mask underlying fears of cumulative U.S. pressure.² Tehran would like nothing better than to drag Washington into drawn out, unproductive nuclear negotiations after America's main forms of pressure have been negated, while leaving Iran free to reconstitute its own depleted capabilities.

Prolonging the current ceasefire to await further negotiations, and potentially attacking Iran's dual-use critical infrastructure if that response is found wanting, will not alter this calculus. By itself, exchanging countervalue strikes enables the regime to inflict greater damage than it absorbs, while also buying time for it to regather its military arsenals, reassert control internally, and compound the global economic harm from its blockade.

III. Epic Fury 2

The United States should turn the tables on Iran by promptly ramping up military operations to shut off its remaining revenue streams, end its blockade, and disrupt and degrade its retaliatory arsenals and internal control.

A. Expand the U.S. Blockade

Shifting the scales begins with ramping up the U.S. blockade, in order to maximally deny weapons resupplies and revenues to Iran's military forces and cash-strapped regime. Washington should aim for the blockade to be complete and enduring. In concert with partners, the U.S. blockade of military-related supplies enforces globally binding UN Security Council sanctions on Iranian weapons proliferation and development.

The U.S. Navy's ongoing distant blockade, along the line where the Gulf of Oman meets the Arabian Sea, should do everything possible to ensure zero ships are able to transit to and from Iranian ports. The blockade already is deterring many ships from leaving Iranian ports and turning back dozens of other vessels that have sought to breach it.³ But thanks to decades of sanctions evasion, Iran's "ghost fleets" are well-versed in countering U.S.-led economic warfare and can be expected to continue illicitly renaming and reflagging vessels, turning off their Automatic Identification System transceivers to hide or spoof their location, and conducting ship-to-ship transfers—including in Iranian territorial waters.⁴ To the

extent Iran successfully undermines enforcement, especially with Chinese and/or Russian connivance, it also erodes the credibility of U.S. threats that the blockade is meant to underpin.

Accordingly, an expanded blockade should include stringent U.S. sanctions enforcement against efforts by Iran and any other countries, chiefly China, that utilize such tactics. The Trump administration's recent warnings to Beijing are a salutary step toward this goal, as are new sanctions on Chinese refining of illicit Iranian oil exports.⁵ President Trump should emphasize these concerns, and American willingness to address them, in his forthcoming summit with President Xi Jinping. The United States also will need to devote considerable intelligence capabilities to track Iran's expected evasion of sanctions and the blockade.

The United States also should consider limited and precise kinetic action as part of the blockade, namely striking mooring locations for ships on Kharg Island inside the Gulf. This is a key upstream node in Iran's ability to load energy cargoes, and thus neutralizing it would free up U.S. Navy assets to focus on other aspects of the blockade and/or ending Iran's control of the Strait (see next section).

B. End Iran's Threat to Shipping

Ending Iran's readiest form of leverage should go hand-in-hand with a comprehensive U.S. blockade. Resolving the Hormuz blockade diplomatically would be counterproductive, by effectively signaling U.S. acceptance of the regime's "right" to decide the Strait's fate, legitimizing the regime's future claims to tax, inspect, approve, or selectively permit and deny passage, and giving it a cudgel to wield in any follow-on talks with the United States. Instead, the United States should invalidate Iran's claims militarily and end its ability to pose prohibitive risks to freedom of navigation through these international waters.

i. Deny Iran's Military Control of the Strait and Gulf

First, the United States must reestablish its presence in Hormuz and the Gulf, including demonstrating that it can sail through these waters at will. Project Freedom, the new U.S. effort involving guided-missile destroyers (DDG), over 100 land- and sea-based manned aircraft, and unmanned platforms, seeks to help ships escape the Gulf through the Strait, but it does not aim to restore routine commercial traffic in and out of the crucial waterway.⁶

Before commercial shippers will resume transits in anything like prewar numbers, a regular and sizable U.S. military presence will be a prerequisite for convincing them that the potential benefits of transiting the Strait outweigh the potential risks. This is especially true as Iran already is retaliating kinetically against efforts to discredit its claims of controlling the Strait.⁷ Reestablishing U.S. presence in these waters will require the sharp degradation of Iran's remaining anti-shipping capabilities, chiefly fast attack craft, anti-ship missiles and drones, naval mines, and supporting infrastructure.

According to American officials, more than 90 percent of Iran's major surface combatants have been destroyed, along with half its small attack boat fleet and more than 95 percent of its naval mines.⁸ But this still leaves potentially thousands of naval mines and appreciable numbers of fast attack craft, as well as unknown numbers of anti-ship missiles and drones. In light of Iran's ability to disperse and hide these capabilities along its rocky and island-dotted coastline, reopening the Strait and surrounding waters

should entail a combination of naval, air, and, potentially, limited ground operations. Iran's residual capabilities will need to be degraded significantly, given its proven ability to shut in shipping in the Gulf with minimal kinetic action. Since the ceasefire, these persistent, if low, risks of attack have helped deter anything like a resumption of normal prewar traffic through the Strait.

ii. A2/AD Transit Lane Bubble and Mine Countermeasures

As the United States reasserts its presence in the Strait and the Gulf, and as these Iranian capabilities are degraded, the United States still will need to convert Project Freedom into a persistent maritime security anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) transit corridor to protect against Iranian attacks and neutralize naval mines.

The DDGs that the United States has sent into the Gulf as part of Project Freedom are well-suited for this effort, but enabling the return of normal commercial traffic entails additional deployments in the Strait and surrounding waters. Currently there are 14 DDGs in the theater, but many of those currently deployed are tasked with other missions such as blockading and carrier defense.⁹ From the air, AH-64 Apache attack helicopters have proven effective against drone swarms and fast attack craft, and can conduct low-altitude overwatch and intercept missions across the transit corridor. Similarly, A-10 aircraft can provide close-in strikes well-suited to hitting fast boats. Establishing an A2/AD bubble would also require persistent surveillance that could be provided by unmanned platforms and airborne early warning (AEW) aircraft.

Mine countermeasures (MCM) ships and helicopters will be just as crucial, sweeping sea lanes to enable safe passage and assuage commercial shippers' risk perceptions. But the U.S. Navy has had no minesweepers inside the Gulf since late last year, after decommissioning four *Avenger*-class MCM ships that had been homeported in Bahrain.¹⁰ And though multiple MCM littoral combat ships (LCS) are deploying to the region, these alone will be insufficient. The United States will need to work with key NATO partners like Germany, Netherlands, France, Belgium, and the United Kingdom to bolster overall MCM capabilities for this mission. While several U.S. partners have ruled out participating in operations during major combat, these and other NATO partner navies could also potentially contribute warships and other capabilities.

iii. Gulf Partner Cooperation

These missions also will entail cooperation with Gulf partners to provide basing access and air support. Operating from these bases and U.S. Navy aircraft carriers, U.S. close air support (CAS) aircraft, light helicopters, and other surveillance and attack platforms can conduct maritime overwatch and anti-surface warfare missions. Gulf partners, especially the U.A.E., can also provide useful air and surveillance support—including attack helicopters in the case of the U.A.E.—while other partners can contribute maritime patrol, logistics, and air-defense assets. U.S. officials should encourage the U.A.E. to pursue combat air patrols capable of shooting down Iranian drones and helping protect commercial transit.

iv. Other Incentives for Commercial Shipping

Expanding compensation and insurance guarantees for ships that participate in U.S.-protected transit, including hull damage, cargo losses, crew injuries, cleanup costs, emergency repairs, salvage, delays

caused by attacks or mines, war-risk insurance deductibles, and temporary premium increases tied to the transit would demonstrate that shipping through Hormuz can remain commercially viable despite Iranian threats. It would also show Gulf partners that Washington will not accept a settlement that leaves them functionally trapped behind an Iranian maritime veto.

C. Target Iran's Missiles and Drones

As the blockade tightens, U.S. ships enter the Gulf, and additional defenses and partner supporting capabilities move into place, the United States should prioritize kinetic operations against the capabilities Iran would use to retaliate against Gulf partners, U.S. forces, and shipping. That target set should center on ballistic and cruise missile storage sites, launch infrastructure, production and assembly facilities, and the command nodes that coordinate strikes. Simultaneously, Washington and its partners should accelerate interceptor replenishment and surge additional air and missile defense capacity to the Gulf to mitigate damage from projectiles Iran is able to launch. U.S. forces should also strike anti-ship missiles, coastal launchers, and drones that enable Iran's maritime coercion. At the same time, the campaign should avoid attacks on civilian infrastructure, like energy or desalination plants, which would create civilian casualties, fracture U.S. partner support, and invite potentially catastrophic Iranian retaliation against Gulf energy infrastructure, shipping, and partner states.

D. Target the Regime's Internal Control

i. U.S.-led Political and Psychological Warfare

Undermining the regime's internal coercive apparatus directly attacks Tehran's ability to claim it has weathered the campaign and remains in control, which depends on projecting strength to its own population as much as to Washington. Washington can support conditions that encourage defections, refusals to follow orders, and elite fragmentation without assuming that these effects will occur with predictable causality or timeliness.

U.S. strategy should exploit fissures when they appear, while still planning to defeat the capabilities that let the regime coerce its neighbors and threaten global commerce. To increase psychological pressure on IRGC leadership, undermine its cohesion, and complicate its ability to hide personnel, Washington can publicize a target list that clearly identifies key IRGC commanders and operatives and offer rewards for actionable information leading to their capture or elimination.

Washington should pair this pressure with a deliberate effort to peel the Artesh—Iran's regular army, navy, and air force—away from more hardline IRGC-led pillars of the regime. Unlike the IRGC, whose identity is inseparable from the regime's clerical authorities, Artesh forces have less incentive to fight and die for a regime whose survival is not as deeply intertwined with their own. Working with Israel and Gulf partners, the United States should broadcast clear and credible offers of cash rewards and safe passage for Artesh commanders and units, and for their families, if they refuse orders to fire on civilians, decline to support IRGC operations, or stand down in place.

ii. Israel-led Kinetic Campaign

This political and psychological warfare should be reinforced by resumed decapitation strikes on IRGC and other core regime leadership targets.¹¹ Such efforts should be led by, or closely coordinated with, Israel in light of the latter's highly effective intelligence and covert operations against this target set. Complementary strikes against the regime's internal enforcement infrastructure, like those Israel conducted in March, would erode its ability to project control at the street level. Eliminating senior commanders of the Basij, IRGC Intelligence, and Law Enforcement Command and destroying IRGC Ground Forces bases and regional commands would fragment surviving enforcement units into smaller mobile elements. Hitting the financial institutions that pay security personnel would widen those fractures, imposing friction on Tehran's ability to sustain the synchronized crackdowns it relied on during the 2019 and 2026 protests.

iii. Direct Support to the Iranian People

These steps can eliminate, disorganize, and otherwise undermine the regime's ability and willingness to oppress ordinary Iranian citizens. To capitalize on any such disintegration, and to fulfill stated U.S. objectives to accelerate the conditions for the Islamic Republic's downfall, the United States and Israel should explore options to arm the Iranian people so that they stand up to the regime and defend themselves, if and when this inflection point comes about. These efforts should include supporting the Kurds and other long-repressed Iranian minority communities whose organized resistance networks and territorial concentration positions them to leverage external support.

E. Prevent Iran's Nuclear Reconstitution

Unless Epic Fury 2 ultimately compels Iran to relinquish its nuclear weapons program completely, verifiably, and permanently, U.S.-led efforts will need to neutralize the regime's most dangerous nuclear infrastructure kinetically or, at minimum, ensure rigorous and continuous intelligence-gathering and monitoring.¹² This surveillance would need to be sufficient to provide ample strategic warning for U.S. and/or Israeli military action to defeat any Iranian attempt to resume progress toward nuclear weapons capability, including most urgently and worryingly:

- Excavating or recovering highly enriched uranium (HEU) stockpiles at Isfahan, Natanz, Fordow, and possibly other sites; and/or
- Activities at undeclared or uninspected enrichment- and weaponization-related facilities, including at Isfahan and "Pickaxe Mountain" near Natanz.

Persistent monitoring efforts would need to be coordinated closely with Israel and potentially other Western agencies, both in light of U.S. partners' intelligence collection capabilities and extensive familiarity with Iran's nuclear weapons activities, as well as competing demands placed on the U.S. intelligence community by simultaneous Iran-related missions.

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