OPEN SOURCE INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

Tactics in Service of Strategy:

A Framework for Understanding the Alignment Between Tactical Capabilities and Strategic Objectives in the 2025–2026 Iran Conflict

ANALYTICAL BASIS

Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) | Joint and Service Doctrine | U.S. National Security Policy

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Ends-Ways-Means | Levels of War | Clausewitzian Strategic Theory | JP 3-0 / FM 3-0 Operational Art

CONFLICT COVERED

Operation Midnight Hammer (June 2025) | Operation Epic Fury (February–April 2026) | Operation Roaring Lion (Israel) | Iranian Counters

DATE

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Executive Summary

The 2025–2026 U.S.-Israeli military campaign against Iran — comprising Operation Midnight Hammer (June 2025) and Operation Epic Fury (February–April 2026) — presents one of the most instructive recent case studies in the relationship between tactical capability and strategic objective. The campaign achieved remarkable tactical results: the destruction of more than 11,000 military targets, the elimination of the Iranian supreme leader and senior military leadership, the effective neutralization of Iran's navy, the degradation of its air defense network, and severe damage to its ballistic missile production infrastructure. A ceasefire was reached on April 7–8, 2026.

Yet as of the date of this analysis, the defining strategic objective — verifiable elimination of Iran's nuclear weapons potential — remains unresolved. Approximately 440.9 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60 percent purity, sufficient for an estimated ten nuclear warheads if further enriched, remains unaccounted for, with IAEA access terminated and the material's location uncertain. The Strait of Hormuz, whose closure inflicted severe global economic disruption, was controlled by Iran throughout the active phase of the conflict and reopened only upon ceasefire — not as a result of military action against it. The nuclear knowledge base, dispersed among surviving scientists and covert networks, is structurally ineradicable by air campaign.

This framework examines why — through the lens of joint doctrine, strategic theory, and the Ends-Ways-Means construct — the most tactically impressive air campaign in decades produced outcomes that multiple authoritative analysts describe as strategically indeterminate. It identifies the doctrinal principles that bear directly on this case, analyzes the specific alignment and misalignment points between tactical actions and strategic ends, and draws lessons for the post-ceasefire phase and for future campaign design.

Part I. Doctrinal and Theoretical Foundation

1.1 The Levels of War: Tactical, Operational, Strategic

Joint doctrine, codified in JP 3-0 (Joint Operations) and reinforced in FM 3-0 (Operations, 2022), establishes three levels of war as the conceptual architecture within which military activity is organized and evaluated: tactical, operational, and strategic. These are not merely hierarchical labels; they represent

qualitatively different domains of activity governed by different logics, time horizons, and measures of effectiveness.

At the tactical level, commanders employ forces to achieve military objectives within a specific battle or engagement. Tactical success is measured by physical outcomes: targets destroyed, positions taken, adversary forces degraded. At the operational level, commanders sequence tactical actions to achieve campaign objectives that are designed to directly enable strategic outcomes. At the strategic level, national leadership employs the instruments of national power — diplomatic, informational, military, and economic — to achieve national or theater-level objectives. The central doctrinal warning embedded in JP 3-0 is that tactical success does not automatically translate to operational or strategic success.

> **JP 3-0 on the Levels of War**
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> Joint doctrine defines the strategic level as governing the employment of national power to achieve national objectives. The operational level links tactical employment of forces to strategic objectives through the design, organization, and conduct of campaigns. Tactical actions produce results — effects on enemy forces or terrain — that are meaningful only insofar as they are connected, through sound operational design, to the strategic purpose of the campaign.
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> The critical implication: a campaign that achieves all of its tactical objectives may still fail to achieve its strategic ends if the connection between tactical action and strategic outcome is poorly designed, incompletely resourced, or logically defective.

1.2 The Ends-Ways-Means Framework

The Ends-Ways-Means framework, foundational in U.S. national security strategy formulation since its development by Arthur Lykke in the 1980s and now embedded in PME curricula from CGSC through the National War College, provides the essential structure for assessing strategic coherence. Ends are the objectives — what the campaign is designed to achieve. Ways are the methods — how military and other instruments are applied. Means are the resources — the forces, systems, authorities, and fiscal resources available.

The framework also incorporates risk: when ends are ambitious, ways are constrained, or means are insufficient relative to the objective, strategic risk increases. A campaign characterized by maximalist ends — regime change, permanent nuclear disarmament, elimination of proxy networks — pursued through a single means (air power) via a single way (kinetic strikes) incurs strategic risk commensurate with the gap between what air power can achieve and what the strategic ends require.

1.3 Clausewitz and the Nature of War as Political Instrument

Carl von Clausewitz's foundational principle — that war is the continuation of politics by other means — has direct applicability to the Iran conflict. The implication most relevant to tactical-strategic alignment is Clausewitz's insistence that military action is always instrumentally subordinate to political purpose. Military success has no inherent value; it has value only insofar as it advances the political objectives that justified the conflict's initiation.

A second Clausewitzian concept of direct relevance is the distinction between the military objective (defeat of enemy forces) and the political objective (the desired post-war state). These are related but distinct, and campaigns that focus exclusively on the former while leaving the latter unspecified or unachievable by military means alone are structurally at risk of strategic indeterminacy — military operations that conclude without producing a durable political settlement commensurate with the costs incurred.

1.4 Operational Art and Campaign Design

FM 3-0 defines operational art as the use of creative thinking by commanders and staffs to design strategies, campaigns, and operations that achieve objectives through the arrangement of military actions in time, space, and purpose. The operative discipline is campaign design: the deliberate connection of tactical actions to operational objectives to strategic ends through a coherent logic of how the military instrument, combined with diplomatic, informational, and economic instruments, will produce the desired end state.

The Iran conflict raises a fundamental question of campaign design: was there a coherent theory of victory — a credible explanation of how the destruction of Iran's military infrastructure would produce the desired post-conflict political state — that connected tactical actions to the stated strategic ends? The evidence available in open sources suggests the answer is contested, with the tactical campaign and its execution highly sophisticated but the post-conflict political architecture underdeveloped at the time operations commenced.

Part II. Conflict Context: Strategic Objectives and Operational Timeline

2.1 The Strategic Context: From Maximum Pressure to Military Action

The path to Operation Epic Fury was shaped by a sequence of escalating strategic decisions over more than a year. The Trump administration's February 2025 restoration of maximum pressure policy — through NSPM-2 directing maximum economic sanctions and a campaign to drive Iranian oil exports to zero — established the economic foundation of a coercive strategy. Diplomatic engagement in April–May 2025 produced five rounds of mostly indirect talks that centered on uranium enrichment, missile constraints, and proxy network cessation, but did not produce a binding framework.

Operation Midnight Hammer, the June 2025 U.S. airstrikes on Iranian nuclear sites at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan using GBU-57A/B bunker-buster munitions, represented the first direct military application of this strategy. The Trump administration characterized the strikes as having "totally obliterated" Iran's nuclear facilities. A preliminary DIA assessment assessed, by contrast, that Iran had moved much of its enriched uranium stockpile before the strikes and that the facilities were not collapsed — setting back Iran's nuclear capability by months, not indefinitely.

The period from June 2025 to February 2026 saw Iran's domestic situation deteriorate severely: currency collapse, nationwide protests beginning December 28, 2025, and the Iranian government's violent suppression — killing between 3,000 and 32,000 protesters by various estimates. The U.S. military buildup beginning in late January 2026 was the largest in the region since the 2003 Iraq invasion. Negotiations in February 2026 showed meaningful progress — Oman's foreign minister described Iran as willing to accept unprecedented concessions on uranium stockpiling — before the February 28 strikes commenced.

Event	Date	Tactical Significance	Strategic Significance
NSPM-2: Maximum Pressure Restored	Feb 4, 2025	None — non-kinetic	Establishes coercive economic foundation; isolates Iran from revenue
Twelve-Day War (Operation Midnight Hammer)	June 2025	Strikes on Fordow, Natanz, Isfahan; significant damage to enrichment infrastructure	Iran moves enriched uranium stockpile before strikes; DIA assesses months-level setback, not permanent
2025–2026 Iranian Protests	Dec 28, 2025 – Feb 2026	Degrades internal security apparatus focus	Regime's legitimacy critically weakened; U.S. uses protests as political leverage

Event	Date	Tactical Significance	Strategic Significance
U.S. Military Buildup	Late Jan – Feb 28, 2026	Largest Middle East buildup since 2003; pre-positions strike assets	Signals credible threat; narrows diplomatic space; Oman talks ongoing simultaneously
Operation Epic Fury / Roaring Lion Initiated	Feb 28, 2026	~900 strikes in first 12 hours; Khamenei and senior leadership killed	Assassination of supreme leader removes primary decision node; decapitation of regime hierarchy
Strait of Hormuz Closure	Feb–Apr 2026	Iran closes strait; 2,000+ ships halted	Global energy crisis; oil price surge; tactical retaliation with strategic-level economic effect
IAEA Access Terminated	Feb 28, 2026	All surveillance cameras disabled, seals removed	Critical verification gap; 440.9kg of 60% HEU location unknown; IAEA blind
F-15E Shoot-down	Apr 3, 2026	First U.S. aircraft loss to Iranian shoulder-fired SAM	Raises cost of continued air campaign; Iranian tactical adaptation demonstrated
Iranian Rejection of 45-Day Ceasefire	Apr 6, 2026	N/A — diplomatic	Iran submits 10-point counter-proposal; signals intent to negotiate from remaining leverage (Hormuz, HEU)
Ceasefire Agreement (Two-Week)	Apr 7–8, 2026	Major combat operations cease; 38 days of strikes	Strait to reopen; negotiations to begin Apr 10 in Islamabad; HEU status unresolved; Iran retains control of Hormuz

2.2 Stated Strategic Objectives: Multiplicity and Evolution

A foundational indicator of potential strategic misalignment is the multiplicity and inconsistency of the stated strategic objectives for Operation Epic Fury across its 38-day active phase. An analysis of authoritative official statements reveals at least six distinct strategic-level objectives that were articulated at various points, not all of which are mutually reinforcing and some of which are in direct tension.

Stated Objective	Source / Date	Achievable by Air Campaign Alone?	Status at Ceasefire
Prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapon	President Trump, Feb 28, 2026	Partial — infrastructure degraded, HEU stockpile intact	Unresolved: 440.9kg of 60%-HEU location unknown; breakout estimated 12 weeks post-strike
Destroy ballistic missiles and production capacity	CJCS Caine, Feb 28, 2026	Yes — significant	Substantially achieved: >85% of defense industrial base destroyed per White House

Stated Objective	Source / Date	Achievable by Air Campaign Alone?	Status at Ceasefire
Annihilate Iranian navy	CJCS Caine, Feb 28, 2026	Yes	Achieved: 150 warships destroyed, all submarines sunk
Sever proxy network support / destroy proxy arming capability	Press Sec. Leavitt, March 10, 2026	Partial	Partially achieved: Hezbollah still operational; proxy networks degraded but not eliminated
Achieve regime change	Multiple administration officials; implicit in leadership targeting	No — air power cannot impose political successor	Indeterminate: regime decapitated; no successor government emerged; talks with surviving Iranian officials
Secure / eliminate enriched uranium stockpile (HEU)	President Trump (various)	No — requires ground presence	Unachieved: 440.9kg at 60% enrichment unaccounted for; physical seizure option reportedly under review
Pre-empt Iranian attack on U.S. assets	Administration framing; disputed by Pentagon officials	Conditional	Disputed: No confirmed intelligence of Iranian pre-emptive attack planning per closed Congressional briefings

Part III. The Tactical-Strategic Alignment Framework: Applied Analysis

The framework applied in this analysis organizes the alignment question across five dimensions: (1) Objective Clarity and Coherence; (2) Means-Ends Commensurability; (3) Time Horizon Compatibility; (4) Second-Order Effects Management; and (5) Post-Conflict Architecture Adequacy. Each dimension is analyzed in turn using available OSINT.

3.1 Objective Clarity and Coherence

The first and foundational requirement for tactical-strategic alignment is clear, coherent strategic objectives — specific enough to generate operational tasks, few enough to be sequenced, and mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. The Iran campaign was characterized by significant objective proliferation: stated aims expanded from nuclear program destruction to naval annihilation,

proxy network dismantlement, and — variably — regime change, each with different requirements for military means and time horizons.

The CJCS's formal statement on February 28, 2026 defined three military objectives: destroy ballistic missile and drone capabilities, destroy the Iranian navy, and destroy the defense industrial base. These are tactically specific, verifiable, and achievable by air campaign. They are also categorically distinct from the broader political objectives — permanent nuclear disarmament, regime change, Iranian cessation of proxy support — articulated in political messaging. This divergence between military objectives (as defined by the CJCS) and political objectives (as expressed by the President and Secretary of State) represents a structural alignment problem: the military instrument is calibrated to achieve the former, while political success is defined by the latter.

> **Georgetown Journal of International Affairs Assessment (April 2026)**
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> Despite President Trump outlining four clear military objectives for Operation Epic Fury — preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, destroying missile sites, degrading proxy networks, and annihilating its navy — the ultimate objective appears to be the systematic degradation of the Iranian government. This represents an implicit strategic objective that exceeds the military's operational mandate and cannot be achieved by kinetic means alone.
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> The divergence between the formally stated military objectives and the implied political objective creates a gap that air power cannot bridge and that no post-conflict architecture has yet been designed to fill.

3.2 Means-Ends Commensurability

The second analytical dimension examines whether the means employed — specifically, a sustained air and naval campaign without ground forces — are commensurate with the most ambitious of the strategic ends sought. This is the central structural tension of the campaign.

For the objectives that are achievable by air power — destruction of naval assets, degradation of ballistic missile production infrastructure, targeting of command and control nodes — the means-ends relationship is well-calibrated. The joint force's performance on these objectives was, by all available open-source accounts, tactically exceptional. More than 11,000 targets struck in 38 days, air superiority established progressively across Iranian airspace, the Iranian navy functionally eliminated.

For the objectives that require either ground presence or political transformation, the means-ends relationship is structurally incommensurable. The approximately 440.9 kilograms of 60%-enriched uranium — the most consequential single variable in the nuclear objective — cannot be destroyed by

air strikes on facilities without catastrophic radiological contamination. It must be physically seized, verified, and removed. As analysts at the Center for Strategic and International Studies note, Iran's nuclear knowledge base cannot be eliminated: the scientists, institutional memory, and covert networks that constitute the foundational human infrastructure of the program survive air campaigns. The LSE School of Government analysis draws an additional conclusion: kinetic preventive strikes tend not to reverse nuclear ambition, but to intensify it, by demonstrating to the targeted state precisely why a completed deterrent is essential to its survival.

> **The Knowledge Problem — LSE / CSIS Analysis, March 2026**
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> "While instances of preventive force may physically delay a program, they are also likely to intensify nuclear ambition. When a state is actually struck, the 'shadow of military force' is no longer a shadow — it is a reality. This often removes the incentive for nuclear reversal negotiations and replaces it with a desperate need for a completed deterrent to prevent a further strike." (LSE School of Government, March 9, 2026)
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> "Iran still possesses 400 kilograms of 60 percent enriched uranium, and the exact location of that nuclear material remains unknown. If the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran collapses, Iranian nuclear scientists could pose proliferation risks to non-state actors or outside countries interested in proliferation." (CSIS Project on Nuclear Issues, March 2, 2026)

3.3 Time Horizon Compatibility

Effective tactical-strategic alignment requires that the time horizon of tactical action be compatible with the time horizon of the strategic objective. Short-duration tactical campaigns can achieve rapid, verifiable kinetic effects — assets destroyed, forces attrited, networks disrupted. Long-duration strategic objectives — permanent behavioral change, political transformation, verified and sustained denuclearization — operate on timelines measured in years to decades.

Operation Epic Fury was designed and publicly framed as a four-to-six week campaign. This framing is appropriate for the tactically achievable objectives (naval destruction, missile production degradation). It is structurally incompatible with the strategic objective of permanent Iranian nuclear disarmament, which requires sustained verification, diplomatic architecture, and enforcement mechanisms operating over an indefinite future period. The ceasefire agreement's two-week window and the scheduled Islamabad negotiations represent the transition from the tactical campaign to the strategic work that air power cannot perform.

The Georgetown analysis articulates this time horizon gap directly: "Short-term operations may achieve tactical objectives, but long-term stability requires

diplomacy, regional cooperation, and political legitimacy. Without such a balanced strategy, the risks of humanitarian crises, economic disruption, terrorism, and broader geopolitical escalation will continue to grow."

3.4 Second-Order Effects Management

Joint doctrine consistently emphasizes that effective campaign design requires anticipation of second- and third-order effects — consequences of military action beyond the immediate intended outcome. The Iran conflict produced several second-order effects of strategic magnitude that the available evidence suggests were inadequately integrated into the campaign's strategic design.

Second-Order Effect	Character	Strategic Impact	Doctrinal Principle Implicated
Strait of Hormuz closure	Anticipated but not prevented	Global energy crisis; oil price surge; estimated 20M barrels/day halted; U.S. forced into oil sanctions relief for Russia and Iran	Effects-based operations; objectives should include mitigation of adversary's most consequential retaliatory options
IAEA access termination	Consequential and persistent	Complete loss of nuclear verification capability; HEU location unknown; breakout cannot be monitored; strategic objective undermined	Campaign design must account for actions that structurally foreclose verification options
Intensified nuclear motivation	Long-term / structural	LSE/CSIS assessment: strikes strengthen Iranian motivation to weaponize; successor government will inherit stronger rationale for deterrent	Preventive force can accelerate what it intends to reverse — a fundamental campaign design risk
Fragmented regime succession	Ongoing	No coherent successor leadership emerged; Iran negotiated through Foreign Minister Araghchi; U.S. uncertain interlocutor for any settlement	Decapitation of leadership without prepared successor architecture creates governance vacuum
Proxy network dispersal	Partial / adaptive	Hezbollah retained operational capacity; Houthi pause from regional attacks not attributable solely to strikes; network knowledge dispersed not destroyed	Distributed, resilient networks are not susceptible to centralized kinetic targeting
Coalition fracture / ally restraint	Tactical constraint	Gulf states declined base access for Iran strikes (initially); UK restricted use of Diego Garcia to limited purposes; limits tactical	Alliance management is integral to operational design, not an afterthought

Second-Order Effect	Character	Strategic Impact	Doctrinal Principle Implicated
		options	

3.5 Post-Conflict Architecture Adequacy

The fifth analytical dimension — and the most consequential for long-term strategic success — is the adequacy of the post-conflict political and diplomatic architecture designed to translate tactical gains into durable strategic outcomes. This is where the available OSINT evidence reveals the most significant gap.

As of the ceasefire on April 7–8, 2026, the following structural questions remain unresolved: What is the mechanism for verifying and securing Iran's 440.9 kilograms of 60%-enriched uranium? IAEA access has been terminated, and without a verification framework, the nuclear objective cannot be characterized as achieved. What is the political framework for post-Khamenei Iran? The regime's decapitation, while tactically significant, produced no prepared successor architecture and no agreed transition mechanism. What enforcement mechanism prevents reconstitution? Al Jazeera's analysis notes directly: "Strategic disarmament without occupation requires a verification and enforcement architecture that no one has yet proposed."

The Middle East Forum's analysis of the ceasefire's first days captures this structural gap with particular clarity: "The direct U.S.-Israeli strikes on Iran proper have paused. The question is not whether the coalition won the war. The question is whether 'won' describes anything that has actually happened." NPR's reporting on the ceasefire is similarly blunt: despite suggestions that the U.S. would seize the Strait of Hormuz, the ceasefire agreement leaves Tehran in control of the strategic waterway, and Iran's nuclear material remains unaccounted for.

Part IV. Doctrinal Principles: What Doctrine Tells Us About This Case

4.1 Objective — The Principle Most Directly Implicated

The Principle of Objective — one of the nine principles of war embedded in U.S. military doctrine since FM 100-5 and carried forward through FM 3-0 — holds that every military operation must be directed toward a clearly defined, decisive, and achievable objective. The application of this principle to the Iran campaign

reveals a characteristic failure mode: the formal military objectives (CJCS's three taskings) are clear, decisive, and achievable; the informal political objectives (permanent denuclearization, regime change) are neither achievable by the military means employed nor translated into formal operational tasks with supporting resources.

The doctrinal warning embedded in this principle is that objectives must be defined in terms of the desired end state, not merely in terms of what can be destroyed. "Destroy Iran's navy" is a tactical task, not a strategic objective. A strategic objective is a defined post-conflict condition — a verifiably non-nuclear Iran, a stable regional order, a resumption of international commerce through Hormuz — that the military campaign is designed to help bring about. The distinction between tactical task and strategic objective is precisely the gap this framework is designed to illuminate.

4.2 Unity of Effort and the DIME Framework

JP 3-0 establishes unity of effort — the coordination of all instruments of national power toward a common strategic objective — as a foundational principle of joint operations. The DIME framework (Diplomatic, Informational, Military, Economic) provides the analytical structure: military action is one instrument, and durable strategic outcomes require integration of all four.

The Iran campaign's application of DIME reveals a marked imbalance. The military instrument was applied with extraordinary sophistication and scale. The economic instrument (maximum pressure sanctions) provided the strategic foundation. The diplomatic instrument, however, was prematurely constrained: the February 2026 Oman-mediated talks — which produced significant progress by Oman's account, with Iran reportedly willing to accept unprecedented nuclear concessions — were overtaken by the initiation of strikes on February 28. The informational instrument — shaping Iranian domestic public opinion and supporting the protest movement as a political lever — appears underutilized as a coordinated element of the campaign design.

The Al Jazeera analysis notes the structural consequence: "War broke out and the assault on Iran began just as the negotiations were making progress, suggesting that Israel and pro-war factions aligned with it within the US administration feared the prospect of a settlement." Whether or not this assessment of motivation is accurate, the timing raises a doctrinal question: was the decision to initiate military operations on February 28 compatible with maximizing the full range of DIME instruments, or did it foreclose diplomatic options that were producing movement toward the strategic objective?

4.3 Economy of Force and Termination Conditions

The CRS analysis of the conflict raises a doctrinal economy-of-force concern with direct strategic implications: "Expanded military action intended to force or facilitate the removal of Iran's regime could entail costs that impose tradeoffs relative to potential U.S. security needs in other global contingencies, and increase perceived risk among some U.S. strategic planners of coordinated or opportunistic conflicts in other theaters."

Georgetown's analysis is more explicit: "Avoiding a prolonged ground war would also preserve U.S. strategic capacity to support Ukraine against Russian aggression and maintain deterrence in the Indo-Pacific in the event of a crisis involving Taiwan." The economy-of-force principle — allocating minimum essential combat power to secondary efforts while concentrating decisive power at the decisive point — applies not merely within the Iran campaign but across the global strategic portfolio. A sustained Iran campaign absorbs munition stocks, carrier availability, ISR assets, and strategic attention at potential cost to deterrence elsewhere.

The munitions dimension is a concrete expression of this concern. The CSIS analysis observed that the quantities of SM-3, LRASM, and Tomahawk missiles procured in the 2026 reconciliation package were likely consumed at comparable rates to procurement within the first days of operations, producing stockpile stress with direct implications for other deterrence commitments.

Part V. Framework Summary: Alignment Assessment

The following assessment matrix applies the five-dimension framework to the Iran campaign, drawing on the OSINT sources analyzed above.

Dimension	Assessment	Evidence Basis	Risk Level
Objective Clarity and Coherence	PARTIAL — Military objectives (CJCS) are clear and coherent. Political objectives are multiple, evolving, and not fully achievable by military means alone.	Divergence between CJCS Feb 28 statement (3 objectives) and political messaging (6+ objectives); Georgetown / Middle East Forum analysis	HIGH — Undefined or aspirational political objectives create a success standard the military campaign cannot meet
Means-Ends	MIXED — Well-	CSIS PONI on HEU	HIGH — The

Dimension	Assessment	Evidence Basis	Risk Level
Commensurability	calibrated for kinetic objectives (naval, missile, DIB). Structurally incommensurable with HEU seizure, regime succession, proxy network elimination.	location; LSE on nuclear motivation intensification; SOF.news on HEU seizure infeasibility	campaign's most important strategic objective (nuclear disarmament) cannot be achieved by the means employed
Time Horizon Compatibility	MISALIGNED — 4-to-6-week campaign framing is appropriate for kinetic objectives. Strategic objectives (permanent denuclearization, regional order) require indefinite post-conflict engagement.	Georgetown GJIA analysis; White House framing vs. Islamabad negotiation timeline; ceasefire structure	MEDIUM-HIGH — Tactical success may create political pressure to declare victory before strategic work is complete
Second-Order Effects Management	INADEQUATE — Multiple strategic-magnitude effects (Hormuz closure, IAEA access termination, nuclear motivation intensification) appear undermanaged in campaign design.	NPR ceasefire assessment; CSIS nuclear program remnants; LSE intensification thesis; JINSA proxy analysis; energy market disruption data	HIGH — Hormuz closure and IAEA blackout represent Iranian tactical responses that achieved strategic-level effects
Post-Conflict Architecture Adequacy	UNDERDEVELOPED — No publicly articulated verification regime, successor governance framework, or reconstitution enforcement mechanism as of ceasefire date.	Al Jazeera; Middle East Forum; NPR; CRS R48887; "a verification and enforcement architecture that no one has yet proposed"	CRITICAL — Without post-conflict architecture, tactical gains cannot be locked into durable strategic outcomes

Part VI. Lessons and Implications for the Post-Ceasefire Phase

6.1 Lesson 1: Tactical Excellence Cannot Substitute for Strategic Design

The Iran campaign represents a high-water mark of American air power application: the scale, precision, and comprehensiveness of the strikes on Iranian military infrastructure have no recent precedent. Yet the most consequential strategic question — what happens to 440.9 kilograms of 60%-enriched uranium now located at dispersed, hardened, inaccessible sites with no IAEA verification access — cannot be answered by air power, and was not resolved during the 38 days of major combat operations.

The lesson is not that the military campaign was wrong to pursue tactically achievable objectives with maximum effectiveness. It is that tactical objectives must be nested within a strategic design that identifies, resources, and sequences the non-military instruments required to achieve the actual political end state. Stating a political objective — permanent Iranian nuclear disarmament — does not constitute a plan for achieving it.

6.2 Lesson 2: The Decapitation Problem and Successor Architecture

The killing of Supreme Leader Khamenei represents, as the FDD analysis notes, a categorically significant event — the elimination of the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism's principal leader. It also creates an immediate doctrinal challenge: decapitation of leadership, without a prepared successor architecture, produces a governance vacuum rather than a transformed political order. The regime's internal security apparatus was targeted alongside its military capabilities — the implicit theory being that weakening the suppression mechanism would enable internal uprising.

The available evidence suggests this theory has not yet produced a successor government. Iran negotiated the ceasefire through Foreign Minister Araghchi — a surviving regime official — not through an opposition alternative. The U.S. has proposed that it is "open to a new supreme leader being appointed after Khamenei's death," a formulation that suggests the objective has shifted from regime change to regime modification. The doctrinal lesson is that leadership targeting must be accompanied by a coherent theory of what political order follows, with the means — political support, information operations, security guarantees, economic incentives — to help bring it into being.

6.3 Lesson 3: The Iranian Strategy of Endurance and Leverage Preservation

Iran's strategic behavior during the conflict demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of asymmetric leverage. Faced with a military campaign it could not defeat conventionally, Iran identified and exploited the instruments of

coercion available to it: the Strait of Hormuz closure (inflicting strategic-level economic damage without military equivalence), maintenance of the enriched uranium stockpile as a negotiating asset, and a ten-point ceasefire proposal that demanded permanent non-aggression guarantees, sanctions relief, reparations, and control over Hormuz passage.

The SOF.news analysis captures this dynamic: "Iran is going to pursue a protracted conflict strategy; continue to take the punishment of air strikes but still 'win' in the end — retaining its nuclear material, gaining greater control of the Strait of Hormuz, and not 'selling out' its proxies." The ceasefire's outcome — Iran retains Hormuz control in the short term, nuclear material unaccounted for, negotiations ongoing — suggests that Iran's leverage preservation strategy partially succeeded.

6.4 Lesson 4: Verification Architecture Must Precede, Not Follow, Military Action

The most consequential post-conflict challenge — verifying the status and location of Iran's enriched uranium — was structurally foreclosed on the first day of operations when Iran terminated all IAEA access. A campaign design that places verification at the center of the strategic objective must account for the adversary's capacity to sever verification channels as an early, low-cost retaliatory measure. The doctrinal implication is that verification architecture — the treaties, inspection regimes, technical means, and enforcement mechanisms required to confirm strategic success — should be designed and partially resourced before the initiation of military operations, not delegated to post-conflict negotiations from a standing start.

6.5 Lesson 5: The Ends-Ways-Means Framework Requires Honest Risk Accounting

The Ends-Ways-Means framework's utility is not merely descriptive — it is prescriptive, generating an honest assessment of strategic risk when ends exceed means or when ways are insufficient to bridge the gap. The Iran campaign's documented objective of permanent nuclear disarmament, pursued through an air campaign without ground forces, without a pre-established verification regime, without a diplomatic framework capable of binding Iran to a post-conflict settlement, and without a successor governance architecture, represents a case in which the honest application of the Ends-Ways-Means framework would have identified substantial strategic risk before operations commenced.

This is not a retrospective critique of decisions that seemed reasonable at the time. It is a forward-looking doctrinal lesson for the Islamabad negotiations and whatever post-conflict framework follows: the strategic objective of a verifiably

non-nuclear Iran requires resources, instruments, and international support that go far beyond the military means applied during Epic Fury, and the deliberate assembly of those means is now the primary strategic task.

Conclusion

Operation Epic Fury achieved tactical results of historic scale and precision. In 38 days, the joint force and Israeli Defense Forces destroyed the better part of a navy, degraded Iran's ballistic missile production infrastructure by more than 85 percent, eliminated the supreme leader and senior military command, and produced a ceasefire that commits Iran to reopening the Strait of Hormuz and entering negotiations on a broader settlement.

Against the strategic objectives — permanent verifiable nuclear disarmament, cessation of proxy network support, and durable regional stability — the campaign's record is incomplete in ways that no subsequent White House statement can resolve. The 440.9 kilograms of 60%-enriched uranium remains physically dispersed at hardened sites with no IAEA access. Iran's nuclear motivation, according to the best available academic analysis of preventive force dynamics, has likely been intensified rather than reversed. No successor governance framework has emerged. No verification regime exists to confirm compliance with any nuclear commitment Iran might make at Islamabad.

The lesson embedded in the doctrinal framework is both simple and difficult to operationalize: tactical excellence is necessary but never sufficient. The connection between what tactical capabilities can achieve and what strategic objectives require must be designed deliberately, resourced honestly, and sustained beyond the last day of major combat operations. The post-ceasefire phase is not the aftermath of the Iran campaign. It is its most consequential and least determined chapter.

Principal Open Sources

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