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Operation Epic Fury/Roaring Lion is an IW Showcase

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The combined U.S. Operation Epic Fury and Israeli Operation Roaring Lion (OEF/ORL) is the largest conventional air and naval operation in a generation, but it is also an irregular warfare (IW) showcase. The current (mid-April 2026) ceasefire provides an opportunity to take stock of what has happened so far in the IW space.

Asymmetric and Indirect Strategies

Definitions of “irregular warfare” frequently include words like [“asymmetric”](#) and [“indirect,”](#) and Iran’s response to Israeli and U.S. attacks has been both asymmetric and indirect. The U.S. and Israel launched massive attacks on Iran’s military leadership, military forces, military industries, and its nuclear program. Iran responded with asymmetric attacks that focused on economic targets, such as ships in the [Arabian Gulf](#), ship [traffic through the Strait of Hormuz](#), Qatar’s [natural gas liquefaction facilities](#), and other [economic infrastructure in Gulf countries](#). In addition to preferring economic targets over military targets, Iran’s attacks have focused [more on neutral neighboring countries](#), like the UAE and other Gulf countries, than on Israel and the U.S., and their attacks thus far have [killed more people in the Gulf countries than in Israel](#).

Iran’s economic warfare is not just asymmetric but also a highly indirect response to the attacks on its military since Iran’s most effective operation--closing the Strait of

Hormuz--has virtually no direct impact on Iran’s adversaries. [Israel and the U.S., receive virtually nothing](#) through the Strait of Hormuz but neutral countries in places like [southeast Asia have been hit very hard](#) by Iran’s economic warfare even though Iran has expressed no complaints against them. By closing the Strait of Hormuz, Iran essentially launched a [war against the global economy](#) knowing that poor and neutral countries would suffer the most, but hoping the U.S. would [concede to Iranian demands](#) rather than let the global economy suffer.

One fascinating nuance in Iran’s asymmetric attack strategy is its narrative effort to portray its attacks as symmetrical. For example, Iran’s attacks on its Gulf neighbors are often obviously aimed at economic targets but Iran consistently claims it only [attacks U.S. military bases](#), which would be a symmetrical response to U.S. attacks on the Iranian military. When Iran has openly threatened to attack civilian infrastructure in Gulf countries, such as [energy infrastructure](#) and [universities](#), it has claimed these attacks were symmetrical responses to attacks on [Iranian natural gas](#) and [Iranian universities](#). IW theorists often emphasize the asymmetric attacks but Iran’s need to claim its actions are symmetrical suggests that symmetrical actions are inherently more legitimate than asymmetric actions. This aspect of the choice between symmetric and asymmetric actions deserves more study since it suggests risks and opportunities policy makers might not be considering.

The U.S. and Israel took a very direct approach to achieving some of their objectives, such as [destroying Iran’s Navy](#) and its [defense industrial base](#), but they took an indirect approach in pursuit of another objective: regime change. Instead of directly invading Iran to remove and replace the

IWC MISSION: The IWC prepares the warfighter to conduct irregular warfare across the spectrum of conflict by bridging instruction to operationalizing IW using next-generation techniques and concepts that enhance the lethality of the force and positions the United States and key Allies and partners to remain ahead of the threat.



regime by occupying the capital city, as the U.S. did with Iraq in 2003, Israel and the United States have relied on stand-off weapons in the hope that the Iranian people will topple the regime after the bombing stops. The strategy is reminiscent of [Operation Allied Force](#), NATO's bombing campaign against Serbia in the Spring of 1999 that forced Serbia to relinquish control of Kosovo. Operation Allied Force ended with Serbian President Slobodan Milošević still in power, but the Serbian people [overthrew him fifteen months later](#) as an indirect result of the air campaign.

Irans “Mosaic” Command and Control System:

In addition to Iran's irregular strategy of turning a military war against Israel and the United States into an economic war against neutral countries, Iran chose to command and control its war in an irregular manner. Iran is a highly authoritarian nation state in which the Supreme Leader typically maintains tight control not only over the government but also over what [people read, say, and do](#) and even [over the clothes they wear](#). However, in anticipation of U.S. and Israeli efforts to disrupt Iranian military command and control structures, [Iran decentralized command and control](#) to its 31 provinces. Each province controls its own forces and has authority to [employ everything](#) from missiles launched at neighboring countries to local Basij thugs terrifying Iranian civilians. A key feature of the mosaic approach is personnel redundancy, or [the “fourth successor” model](#), where each leader has three or four successors pre-designated so that a chain of command will survive even under severe attrition and minimal communications. Essentially, Iran is a nation state that anticipated invasion and occupation and built a resilient command and control structure more like that of a terrorist network than a normal nation.

Beyond asymmetric and indirect strategies and irregular command and control structures, OEF/ORL and the Iranian response have also emphasized many staples of IW such as proxies, surrogates, and terrorists; cyber and space operations; small, unmanned air and naval systems; and the primacy of narratives and disinformation/deception.

Proxies, Surrogates, and Terrorists

The origins of OEF/ORL date back to [October 7, 2023](#), when Hamas, an Iranian proxy, launched a massive terrorist attack on Israel. Since Iran's proxies started the current conflict, it makes sense that the [destruction of Iran's terrorist proxies is a goal of both Israel](#) and the [United States](#). Most of Iran's proxies have launched attacks to support Iran with [Hezbollah attacking Isreal shortly](#) after OEF/ORL began, Iran-funded [Iraqi militias attacking U.S. facilities](#) soon afterward, and the [Houthis in Yemen launching attacks](#) on Isreal about one month after OEF/ORL began. In addition to the central role of Iran's proxies, potential anti-Iran proxies or surrogates might become important if the fighting continues. For example, [Iranian Kurds have openly talked about joining the fight](#) against the Tehran government, if they receive sufficient U.S. support, i.e., if the U.S. pays them to become proxies.

Iran also launched a new terrorist group, [Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiyya](#), in Europe that responded to attacks on Iran with terrorist attacks on Jewish targets in [Belgium, Greece, and the Netherlands](#), and an attempted attack on [Bank of America offices in France](#). In the Middel East, Qatar arrested ten members of [Iranian Revolutionary Guard \(IRGC\) cells](#), Kuwait [arrested a 16-member Hezbollah cell](#), and the UAE arrested at least [32 Iran-inspired terrorists](#). In the U.S., the FBI reported that Iran [“aspired” to attack California](#) with drones launched from vessels in the Pacific, and an [explosive device was found outside MacDill AFB](#), in Florida. All this indicates that Iran successfully generated a terrorist threat across multiple continents in response to OEF/ORL.

Cyber and Space Operations:

OEF/ORL [opened with U.S. and Israeli cyber-attacks](#). Cyber operations are usually highly classified but published reports indicate that Isreal used [cyber to access Iranian traffic cameras](#) to find and kill Iran's supreme leader in the first moments of OEF/ORL. The Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, revealed that cyber and space operations generated [“non-kinetic effects disrupting and degrading and blinding Iran's ability to see, communicate and respond.”](#) He emphasized that coordinating cyber and space operations gave Israel and the U.S. critical advantages over the Iranians.

Iran responded with [cyber-attacks of its own](#), including hacking the personal email accounts of the [U.S. FBI Di-](#)

rector and the [former head of Israel's Mossad](#) intelligence agency, [disrupting critical infrastructure](#) in the United States, and attacking [government computers in the UAE](#). There are also reports of Iran using Chinese and Russian technology to disrupt U.S. and Israeli use of space assets by [spoofing GPS signals](#). Iran also appears to have [bought a Chinese satellite](#) to help it target Israel and U.S. assets. The U.S. and Israel responded to Iranian actions in the cyber and space domains by striking [Iranian infrastructure associated with cyber and space activities](#).

Small Unmanned Air and Maritime Systems (sUAS and sUMS)

Before the fighting started, much of the focus was on the Iranian ballistic missiles and the ["missile math"](#) determining whether the U.S., Israel, and their partners had enough interceptors to counter Iran's ballistic missiles. Iran's missile threat was brought under control early in the conflict, but small unmanned air systems (sUAS) quickly became Iran's weapon of choice for sustaining its [high rate of daily attacks](#) on its Gulf neighbors. The Gulf countries have responded by [signing agreements with Ukraine](#) to employ Ukrainian counter-sUAS technology and tactics. The U.S. is likewise [making major investments](#) in counter-sUAS technology and training to meet the Iranian threat. The U.S. has also employed its own sUAS, the [low-cost uncrewed combat attack system \(LUCAS\)](#), against Iran during OEF/ORL.

In addition to sUAS attacks by both sides, the current conflict also features small unmanned maritime systems (sUMS) used by Iran. Colorfully referred to as ["kamikaze drone boats"](#), these Iranian craft have [sunk several merchant ships](#) and will continue to threaten shipping long after the conventional Iranian Navy is rendered harmless.

Central Role for Narratives and Disinformation

Iranian messaging has been confused and contradictory because it has two major themes. The first theme is that the mighty armed forces and proud people of [Iran are invincible](#), their enemies should [tremble in fear](#) before them, and they [triumph over everyone in every conflict](#). The second theme is that [innocent, non-threatening Iran](#) is the [victim of unprovoked aggression](#) by the huge, vicious, and criminal United States and Israel. The advantage of these two themes is that at least one of them will work no matter what the situation: when Iran attacks, they use theme one about Iranian power; and when Iran is attacked, they use theme two about Iranian victimhood. The disadvantage of these two messages is that whenever Iran mentions both themes in close succession, the contradiction becomes obvious. After all, if Iran really is so mighty and terrifying, then Israel and the

United States, must be fearless heroes to confront such a frightening adversary. Likewise, if Iran really is so innocent and harmless, then its enemies will not be deterred from attacking it.

The first theme, about Iranian invincibility, is easy to support with disinformation such as reports of Iran damaging a [U.S. Navy amphibious assault ship](#) and other highly exaggerated accounts of Iranian military success. The second theme, depicting Iran as an innocent victim, relies heavily on the February 28 strike on the [Shajarah Tayyibeh elementary school](#) in Minab, [next to an IRGC Naval base](#). Iran makes [school backpacks](#) and other references to Minab a centerpiece of its propaganda. This continues even after the ceasefire went into effect. For example, Iran named the flight carrying Iranian negotiators to peace talks in Islamabad ["flight Minab 168,"](#) referring to the school and the number of fatalities there.

Iran has been quick to weaponize artificial intelligence (AI) in its campaign to control the narrative about OEF/ORL using [AI-generated images](#) to advertise successes Iran did not actually achieve. Iranian messaging also benefits from a pro-Iran online group that uses AI to [generate Lego-style animated products](#) ridiculing the [U.S. President](#). YouTube eventually banned the site, leading to [howls of hypocritical outrage](#) from the censors in Iran.

For its part, the U.S. made extensive use of disinformation and military deception during the [rescue of downed airmen](#) from inside Iran. The deception reportedly included [hijacking the phones of Iranian officials](#) to send fake messages reporting that the missing American was already captured so that the Iranians would call off the search.

Conclusion:

The Iran's leaders show no interest in ending their conflict with the U.S. and Israel and they prefer to conduct their conflict in the IW space, below the level of direct conventional combat. Regardless of whether the current ceasefire in conventional hostilities lasts a short time or a long time, the IW conflict with Iran will continue unabated and IW has not disappeared but instead accelerated during the period of conventional combat.

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