

Air Denied Not Defeated: Iran's Contested Strategy Against Epic Fury and Roaring Lion



Air Vice Marshal Prashant Mohan VM (Retd)
Additional Director General, CAPSS

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Introduction

Operations Epic Fury and Roaring Lion began on February 28, 2026. Their opening wave struck roughly 500 targets in Iran within twenty-four hours. By United States Central Command's (CENTCOM) own account, the campaign eventually struck upward of 11,000 targets across roughly 13,000 combat sorties.¹ The Israeli Air Force separately logged over 10,800 strikes across 8,500 operational sorties.² Judged by sorties flown and targets serviced, this was among the most intensive air campaigns of the past half-century. Judged by its own declared political ends, it was far less conclusive. By mid-August, six months in, Iran's enrichment stockpile remained intact and inaccessible to inspectors. The Strait of Hormuz remained closed to ordinary commerce. Washington's own senior officials had narrowed the definition of success. In Vice President J.D. Vance's own words, the goal was now "cheap oil and gas for Americans."³

That gap between effort and outcome is not, by itself, proof that Iran executed a deliberate strategy. Overwhelming force can fail to convert into political victory even against an adversary that is merely resilient, lucky, or aided by circumstance. This paper asks a narrower question: did Iran's conduct under Operation True Promise IV amount to a coherent strategy? If so, do the concepts most often used to describe it—air denial and mosaic defence—actually fit the record? Are they distinct and sometimes contradictory propositions, or retrospective labels applied to improvisation? The paper closes on India. A materially dominant coalition could not convert tactical execution into strategic closure. A materially inferior adversary inflicted sustained cost regardless. What should

that teach Indian planners about setting goals, defining victory, and choosing ways and means against a comparably resilient adversary?

US-Israeli Goals, Ways, and Means: What Was Set and What Changed

The stated objectives of Epic Fury and Roaring Lion were plural from the outset, and imperfectly reconciled. President Donald Trump's senior administration officials offered what *Hudson Institute* analysts called "divergent and at times contradictory answers" on war aims.⁴ The President invoked terms approaching unconditional surrender.⁵ Secretary of State Marco Rubio spoke of "the systematic degradation of Iran's ability to project military power and the permanent elimination of its nuclear capabilities."⁶ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's own framing leaned toward regime change. A companion *Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies* (CAPSS) assessment of the campaign's opening phase found that "goalposts have continually been changing."⁷ It judged the later shift from counter-force to counter-value targeting "a reactive strategy not quite anticipated by planners," rather than a sequenced plan.

The ways and means committed were, on paper, formidable. The US Department of Defense fact sheets record more than 6,500 manned combat flights in the campaign's first weeks. They record over 7,000 targets struck in that same period.⁸ Twenty-eight distinct platform types took part, from B-2 and B-52 bombers to carrier strike groups. CENTCOM's later tallies put total sorties above 13,000. The Israeli Air Force reported over 800 strike sorties and roughly 16,000 munitions in its first weeks alone. That rose to more than 18,000 munitions and 10,800 strikes in later phases.⁹ Yet the CAPSS assessment records that by day thirteen, precision stand-off munitions had fallen to roughly one per cent of weapons expended. At the same time, the target list swelled past 15,000.¹⁰ That magazine-depth problem pushed planners toward less discriminate weapons. It pushed them, with those weapons, toward the counter-value shift Iran's own messaging was able to exploit. Six months on, the coalition had degraded Iranian capability in absolute terms. It had not secured the sequential outcomes—denuclearisation first, then economic normalisation—originally promised.

Operation True Promise IV: Iran's Demonstrated Effects on the United States, Israel, and the GCC

Iran's retaliation was not negligible. Tehran's declared inventory going into the conflict comprised more than 3,000 ballistic missiles across fourteen types.¹¹ It also included six land-attack and at least three anti-ship cruise missile variants, and five families of long-range one-way attack drones.

Iran typically opened with a tranche of drones meant to saturate and expose air-defence radars. Faster ballistic and cruise missiles then struck the gaps that saturation created. A congressional assessment reported in May 2026 put US aircraft losses and damage at 42 airframes over the course of the campaign.¹² These losses came from a mix of hostile fire, fratricide, and accidents in increasingly congested airspace. Independent post-strike assessment concluded that roughly half of Iran's missile launchers remained intact months into the campaign. Thousands of missiles and drones reportedly remained in inventory as well.¹³ If accurate, that finding undercuts any reading of the campaign as having attrited Iran's strike capacity to exhaustion.

Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz using mining, seizures of merchant shipping, and swarm-boat harassment. It proved more durable than either side's opening assumptions anticipated. By mid-August, daily transits through the strait averaged roughly thirteen vessels, against a pre-war norm of 130 to 140.¹⁴ That reduction held for five months; it did not merely spike and fade. The International Energy Agency (IEA) described Hormuz closure as actively squeezing the global economy through accelerated demand destruction.¹⁵ India felt this directly. It depends on the strait for a large majority of its crude and the great bulk of its liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) imports. Brent crude rose from roughly USD 80 to USD 120 a barrel within the campaign's first two weeks. Domestic cooking-gas prices climbed sharply. By May, Prime Minister Narendra Modi was publicly urging citizens to conserve fuel and defer gold purchases.¹⁶ None of this alone proves doctrine. It does show that Iran's retaliatory campaign generated effects disproportionate to the material balance most pre-war assessments assumed.

Air Denial: Iran's Demonstrated Wherewithal

Air denial differs from air superiority or air control. It describes a posture an actor adopts when it cannot contest a domain outright. Such an actor can still make that domain costly, unpredictable, or degraded enough to meaningfully constrain an adversary's freedom of action.¹⁷ The denying party need not gain freedom to operate there itself. Four elements make up the concept, as applied to the 2026 campaign. The first is dispersing and hardening key assets against precision strikes. The second is degradation of an adversary's sensors and command-and-control architecture, rather than its aircraft directly. The third is persistent, if imprecise, cost imposed through mass rather than precision. The fourth is denial of secure basing and uncontested overflight, to the extent achievable.

On each count, Iran's demonstrated wherewithal was real but partial. Analysts writing in *War on the Rocks* documented a campaign that struck at the "nests and eggs" of American airpower,

rather than at aircraft in the air.¹⁸ Iran hit satellite-communications terminals at Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain.¹⁹ It struck early-warning radar, including AN/FPS-132 and AN/TPY-2 systems, in Qatar and Jordan.²⁰ It hit tanker aircraft at Prince Sultan Air Base.²¹ On March 27, it destroyed an E-3 Sentry airborne early-warning aircraft.²² At that moment, the US fleet had only six E-3s deployed and was already stretched to sustain two continuous orbits.²³ This is a textbook illustration of denial logic: attack enablers rather than platforms. Degrading the whole system, on this reasoning, imposes more friction than attriting individual airframes. Roughly thirty hardened, dispersed underground sites extended the same logic to Iran's own missile production and launch capacity. Several were reopened and returned to limited use within hours of being struck by US bunker-penetrating munitions.²⁴

A more sceptical reading, advanced at the Modern War Institute, argues that “air denial” fits awkwardly with a conflict fought substantially with rockets, cruise missiles, and drones rather than manned aircraft.²⁵ Iranian launches continued “throughout and beyond the conflict.” The author reads this less as evidence of coherent denial doctrine than as proof that traditional air control is no longer achievable against a determined, dispersed adversary. The asymmetric cost structure reinforces this ambiguity rather than resolving it. Iranian Shahed-type drones cost an estimated USD 20,000 to USD 50,000 apiece. Iranian ballistic missiles cost between USD 1 to USD 2 million each. Patriot PAC-3 interceptors cost USD 4–5 million; Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) interceptors cost between USD 12 and USD 15 million.²⁶ Independent analysis judged this exchange ratio unsustainable against repeated large-volume barrages, within any plausible US missile-defence budget. In short, Iran possessed enough of the constituents of air denial to impose real cost and real constraint. It did not possess—or need—the wherewithal to deny the coalition the air domain outright.

Mosaic Defence in the 2026 Test: Coordinated Retaliation versus Decentralised Survival

Mosaic defence is a different proposition from air denial, though commentary on the campaign often conflates the two. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Brigadier General Mohammad Ali Jafari formulated it from 2005. He built thirty-one semi-autonomous provincial commands with pre-delegated authority.²⁷ The doctrine was explicitly designed against decapitation. Its own metaphor holds that a mosaic, unlike a clockwork mechanism, can lose individual tiles while the larger picture survives. The 2026 campaign tested this claim on its very first day, when strikes killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and dozens of senior commanders. Iran launched the opening tranche of Operation True Promise IV within minutes regardless. Provincial IRGC formations

reportedly kept operating without what analysts characterise as clear central authorisation. That reportedly included at least two documented strikes against targets in Oman and Turkey.²⁸

That evidence supports the doctrine's core claim about survivability. It sits awkwardly, though, with how True Promise IV itself appeared: a substantially centrally coordinated retaliatory campaign, sequenced in waves and calibrated in target selection. Decentralised, provincially delegated authority would not obviously produce that on its own. The tension is real, not merely semantic. Iran's missile forces retained pre-delegated launch authority as one of mosaic defence's five constituent domains.²⁹ That fact allows centrally-directed retaliation and decentralised battlefield survival to coexist without contradiction. The offensive missile force executed a broadly centralised campaign plan. Ground and naval formations, meanwhile, absorbed losses and kept functioning without waiting for instructions—instructions that leadership losses had made impossible to issue. The more defensible reading is that True Promise IV's opening salvos were centrally sequenced before decapitation losses fully registered. Subsequent defensive survival, local strikes, and continuity of government then fell to the decentralised architecture mosaic defence was built for. One assessment captures the resulting condition precisely: Iran fought “a war without a centre—operationally continuous but strategically without direction.”³⁰ The same source concludes the system “successfully prevented a rapid regime collapse.” It leaves open, though, whether this durability substitutes for a negotiated strategic outcome, or merely consoles its absence.

Air Denial, Mosaic Defence, or Something Else: Weighing the Evidence

None of the three explanations—air denial, mosaic defence, or generic institutional resilience—fully accounts for Iran's performance on its own. Each operated at different levels and on different timelines, not as competing, mutually exclusive. Air denial best explains the operational-level facts. It shows how Iran degraded coalition effectiveness by targeting sensors, tankers, and command nodes rather than contesting the sky directly. It also shows Iran imposing a cost-exchange ratio no plausible interceptor budget could sustain indefinitely. Mosaic defence best explains the institutional-level fact: why the Iranian state did not collapse after a decapitation strike. Against a more centralised adversary, that strike plausibly would have ended organised resistance within days. Neither concept fully explains the specific, closely sequenced character of True Promise IV's opening waves. Those look less like emergent, bottom-up improvisation than a retaliatory plan that predated the war and was simply executed once triggered.

A third factor is harder to weigh, given the limits of open-source evidence: institutional and cultural preparation. IRGC political culture has been built since 1979 around the expectation of external attack. A leadership succession model matters here too: the so-called “fourth successor” arrangement lets the Assembly of Experts activate interim authority well beyond the immediate chain of command.³¹ It had been rehearsed conceptually, if not operationally, long before February 2026. That prior institutional preparation may account for as much of Iran's demonstrated resilience as either named doctrine alone. The balance of evidence, graded honestly, points toward overlapping, partially coincidental factors. A pre-existing retaliatory plan, a genuinely decentralised survival architecture, and deep institutional preparation for regime survival all played a part. This was not the clean execution of either doctrine in isolation. Analysts should resist collapsing that layered picture into one tidy label for narrative economy.

Perception and Adaptation: Were the US and Israel Surprised?

Western and Israeli planners were not caught entirely unaware by Iranian decentralisation. Iran's provincial IRGC structure and its five-branch mosaic architecture were both documented in open Western scholarship for nearly two decades before 2026.³² So was its post-2003 study of why centralised states collapse quickly under decapitation. What appears to have been underestimated was not decentralisation as a concept. It was that concept's practical durability under sustained, multi-domain pressure. Separately, planners underestimated the depth and dispersal of Iran's missile production and launch infrastructure—something a CAPSS assessment describes as “apparently not been bargained for.”³³

The clearest missed signal sat closer to the war's opening than any doctrinal debate. On February 17-18, 2026, roughly ten days before Epic Fury's first strikes, Iran staged “Maritime Security Belt 2026” at Bandar Abbas with Russian and Chinese naval units.³⁴ A parallel Iranian drill ran alongside it: “Smart Control of the Strait of Hormuz.” That drill practised anti-ship cruise-missile fire. It also carried out drone and submarine operations launched from three Gulf islands—close to the actual toolkit Iran used to shut the strait five weeks later. Western assessment at the time treated the exercise as political theatre rather than rehearsal. A former CENTCOM commander described it as Russia and China “showing support,” not preparing for war. Independent analysts judged the small foreign contingent operationally marginal.³⁵ Whether that judgment reflected a genuine intelligence gap, or a defensible reading of ambiguous evidence, is not settled by open sources. What is clear is this: planners had a concrete, near-term demonstration of strait-closure tactics in view, five weeks out, and did not weight it heavily in campaign planning.

Operationally, the coalition did adapt. The shift toward counter-value targeting reflected real-time adjustment to a harder-than-expected problem. So did the sustained effort to strike missile-production sites despite their hardening and dispersal. But adaptation in execution is not correction in goal-setting, and this is where the campaign's central weakness lay. Victory conditions, on the Hudson Institute's reading, were never made precise enough to be judged achieved or not by any objective external test.³⁶ Six months into a campaign framed initially as existential, the stated primary objective had shifted from denuclearisation to oil-price stability. That shift points less to Iranian success at concealment than to a goal-setting process that never fixed what an acceptable, verifiable end-state would look like. Iran did not so much defeat US and Israeli air campaigns as it outlasted a set of political objectives. Those objectives kept moving to stay within reach of what military means could plausibly deliver.

Implications for India: The Pakistan Question and India's Own Planning

Whether Pakistan could replicate an Iran-style combination of air denial and mosaic defence against India deserves scepticism, not assumption. Pakistan's civil-military relationship, however dominant its army has historically been, is not organised around an IRGC-equivalent institution. It lacks that institution's ideological cohesion, provincial redundancy, and pre-delegated launch authority. Pakistan's own conduct during the 2026 crisis reflects this difference. China pursued active regional mediation during the 2026 Middle East crisis involving Iran. While maintaining an official stance of neutrality, Islamabad hosted multilateral consultations and partnered with Beijing to issue a joint five-point peace initiative urging an immediate ceasefire, dialogue, and maritime security.³⁷ It also deployed forces to Saudi Arabia, framed as defensive cooperation, not an offensive posture.³⁸ That is a state working through conventional inter-state channels, not one rehearsing decentralised resistance doctrine. A structural precondition for mosaic defence is a regime that expects existential, centrally targeted decapitation. Such a regime also needs parallel survival architecture, built against that specific contingency over decades. Nothing in Pakistan's institutional history suggests an equivalent expectation or build-out. Wholesale transplantation of Iran's model is implausible. Selective tactical borrowing—dispersal of missile assets, layered low-cost drone defences—is a different, more plausible matter.

The more durable lesson for India lies less in the Pakistan-specific question. It lies more in what the campaign reveals about goal-setting, victory conditions, and ways-and-means discipline against any comparably resilient adversary, including China. India's own exposure to the campaign's second-order effects was immediate. It depends on the Strait of Hormuz for a large majority of its

crude imports and the great bulk of its LPG supply. That dependence translated directly into a domestic price shock, prompting emergency conservation measures.³⁹ India still honoured fuel-supply commitments to Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh through the crisis. That exposure argues for treating energy and chokepoint resilience as a standing element of India's own strategic calculation, not an afterthought managed once a contingency begins. The central military-planning lesson of Epic Fury and Roaring Lion is harder, but no less important. Overwhelming tactical execution—thousands of sorties, tens of thousands of munitions, sustained target-list growth—did not by itself produce strategic closure. The campaign's political objectives were never pinned down precisely enough, at the outset, for military means to be matched against them with discipline. For India, planning against an adversary that may combine dispersed, hardened strike capacity with decentralised survival architecture of its own, the discipline that mattered most in the Iran case was not additional firepower. It was the prior, harder work of defining, in falsifiable terms, what victory would actually consist of—before committing to the ways and means meant to secure it.

Conclusion

Iran's 2026 performance against Epic Fury and Roaring Lion is best read as neither pure improvisation nor the clean execution of one named doctrine. It was the convergence of three things: a pre-planned retaliatory campaign, a genuinely decentralised survival architecture built over two decades against exactly this contingency, and institutional preparation for regime continuity that predates either doctrinal label. Air denial explains how Iran raised the coalition's operational costs. Mosaic defence explains why decapitation did not produce collapse. Neither alone explains the whole. What the campaign demonstrates most clearly, six months on and still without a settled outcome, is that materially overwhelming force, applied against goals that were never precisely fixed, produces tactical records without strategic closure. That lesson should weigh more heavily on Indian planners than the narrower, less certain question of whether Pakistan could replicate Tehran's specific institutional model.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Aerospace Power and Strategic Studies [CAPSS])

Notes:

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