Anatomy of a Defeat

Turning Operation Epic Fury Into a Catastrophic Failure

A Comprehensive Strategic Analysis of US Military Deployments,
Critical Vulnerabilities, and Defensive Countermeasures
for a Ground Attack on Iran

Based on Open-Source Intelligence (OSINT)

Sources: Atlantic Council, The War Zone, Wikipedia, Al Jazeera, and others

Classification: UNCLASSIFIED / OPEN SOURCE

April 1, 2026

Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary

As of April 1, 2026, the United States has assembled the largest military concentration in the Middle East since the 2003 invasion of Iraq under the banner of Operation Epic Fury. The deployment includes three carrier strike groups, scores of advanced fighter aircraft including fifth-generation F-22 Raptors and F-35C Lightning IIs, strategic B-52 bombers, A-10 Warthog close air support aircraft, the first-ever operational deployment of EA-37B Compass Call electronic warfare jets, elements of the 82nd Airborne Division, and at least two Marine Expeditionary Units. Despite this overwhelming conventional superiority, the operation faces fundamental structural vulnerabilities that a well-prepared Iranian defense could exploit to transform the campaign into a strategic disaster for the United States.

This report presents a systematic analysis of current U.S. military deployments sorted by their importance to a potential ground invasion, identifies the critical "enabler weapons" and infrastructure nodes whose destruction would collapse the entire operational architecture, and develops two detailed scenarios. Scenario A examines how Iranian forces could turn the operation into a complete disaster after it goes live, exploiting the inherent fragility of long supply chains, centralized command structures, and dependence on air superiority and maritime access. Scenario B explores how the operation could be crippled or rendered politically untenable before ground operations commence, through preemptive strikes on staging areas, logistics hubs, and the political will of coalition partners.

The analysis draws on multiple open-source intelligence sources, including the Atlantic Council's real-time tracker of U.S. military assets, The War Zone's detailed reporting on A-10 and EA-37B deployments, Wikipedia's comprehensive documentation of the 2026 buildup, Al Jazeera's reporting on troop movements, and the strategic framework provided by the reference study "Anatomy of a Defeat: Targeting the Critical Weaknesses in a Ground Attack on Iran." The central thesis of this report is that the weakest link in any modern American military expedition is not its frontline combat power but the intricate, technology-dependent, and geographically extended enabling infrastructure that sustains it.

2. Current U.S. Military Deployments to Iran (Operation Epic Fury)

The following comprehensive inventory represents the assembled U.S. military assets in and around the Iranian theater of operations as of late March/early April 2026. These deployments are ranked by their criticality to a ground attack, from the most essential enablers of ground combat operations to supporting assets. Each asset class is evaluated based on its role in enabling, sustaining, or protecting troops on the ground.

2.1 Tier 1: Direct Ground Combat Forces (Highest Priority)

Ground combat forces represent the actual "teeth" of any invasion. Without them, the operation remains an air and naval campaign. Their presence signals a transition from punitive strikes to regime change or territorial occupation, dramatically raising the stakes and, consequently, the vulnerability of the entire enterprise.

Asset	Unit / Designation	Strength	Location / Status	Ground Attack Role
82nd Airborne Division (1st BCT)	1st Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne	~2,000-3,000 paratroopers	Arriving in Middle East; elements at forward bases	Rapid seizure of airfields, bridgeheads; initial entry force for deeper incursions
31st Marine Expeditionary Unit	31st MEU (ARG-based)	~2,200 Marines	Afloat with ARG in Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea	Amphibious assault, helicopter-borne raids, seizure of coastal objectives (e.g., Kharg Island)
11th Marine Expeditionary Unit	11th MEU (ARG-based)	~2,200 Marines	Afloat with ARG in theater	Second amphibious assault capability; support special operations raids on Iranian nuclear sites
Special Operations Forces	Green Berets, Rangers, SEALs, Delta (estimated)	Undisclosed (est. hundreds)	Forward-deployed at classified locations	Deep reconnaissance, target designation, sabotage, liaison with proxy forces (Kurdish militias)

Table 1. Tier 1: Direct Ground Combat Forces Deployed

The deployment of the 82nd Airborne's 1st Brigade Combat Team, announced on March 25, 2026, represents a significant escalation. The cancellation of a major training exercise for the division's headquarters and increased cargo flights between Fort Bragg and the Middle East preceded this movement. The Pentagon is reportedly weighing sending an additional 10,000 combat troops. This force, however, is fundamentally insufficient for a full-scale invasion of Iran, a country of 88 million people with terrain that includes mountain ranges, vast deserts, and dense urban areas. The 82nd Airborne is a light infantry formation optimized for rapid seizure and short-duration operations, not sustained offensive ground combat against a prepared defender. If committed beyond their initial objectives without heavy armored follow-on forces, they become extremely vulnerable to encirclement and attrition.

2.2 Tier 2: Close Air Support and Strike Assets (Critical Enablers)

In modern American warfare doctrine, ground forces do not advance without air cover. Close Air Support (CAS) aircraft are the single most important survivability multiplier for infantry and armored units operating in hostile territory. Without them, even well-trained troops become vulnerable to artillery, armor, and entrenched defensive positions. The A-10 Warthog, in particular, is the preeminent CAS platform, and its deployment signals intent to support ground operations directly.

Asset	Unit / Designation	Quantity	Location / Status	Ground Attack Role
A-10C Thunderbolt II ("Warthog")	124th FW (Idaho ANG), 127th Wing (Michigan ANG)	~20+ aircraft deploying	Transiting via RAF Lakenheath to Middle East; some already operating in theater	Primary CAS platform for ground troops; anti-armor, anti-personnel; critical for Kharg Island and commando raid support
F-15E Strike Eagle	48th FW (RAF Lakenheath), relocated to Jordan	Squadron+, est. 24+	Muwaffaq Salti Air Base, Jordan	Deep-strike against Iranian C2 nodes, air defenses; secondary CAS for ground forces
F-22 Raptor	Undisclosed wing	12 aircraft	Ovda Airbase, southern Israel (hardened shelters)	Air superiority/suppression of Iranian air defenses; enables all other air operations over Iran
F-35C Lightning II	Carrier Air Wings (Lincoln, Ford)	Est. 40+ combined	Aboard USS Abraham Lincoln, USS Gerald R. Ford	Stealth strike/ISR/CAS; survivable inside Iranian IADS; precision targeting for ground force advance
F/A-18E/F Super Hornet	Carrier Air Wings	60+ combined	Aboard carriers in Arabian Sea/Persian Gulf	Multi-role strike/CAS/escort; primary carrier-based strike aircraft
B-52 Stratofortress	Undisclosed wing	Undisclosed (squadron+)	Forward-deployed (Qatar/Bahrain area)	Strategic bombardment of Iranian military infrastructure; pre-invasion softening of defenses

Table 2. Tier 2: Close Air Support and Strike Assets

The A-10 deployment is particularly noteworthy. As reported by The War Zone on March 30, 2026, approximately 20 A-10Cs from the Idaho Air National Guard's 124th Fighter Wing (Gowen Field) and the Michigan Air National Guard's 127th Wing (Selfridge ANGB) were assembling at Portsmouth International Airport in New Hampshire before transiting to RAF Lakenheath, England, and onward to the theater. A-10s are already operating in the region, conducting notably long strafing runs against Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and attacking Iranian naval assets. The Warthog's 30mm GAU-8 cannon and ability to loiter over battlefields for extended periods make it indispensable for ground force protection. However, its slow speed and lack of stealth make it highly vulnerable to Iranian surface-to-air missiles if air defenses are not fully suppressed.

2.3 Tier 3: Air Enablers - Tankers, EW, AEW&C; (Force Multipliers)

These are the "glue" that holds the air campaign together. Without aerial refueling tankers, fighter aircraft cannot reach Iranian airspace from distant bases. Without electronic warfare aircraft, communications and radars remain functional. Without airborne early warning, the air battle is fought blind. These platforms are disproportionately valuable relative to their numbers, and their loss would cascade through the entire operational chain.

Asset	Designation	Qty	Status / Location	Critical Function
KC-135 Stratotanker	Various tanker wings	14+ at Ben Gurion; dozens region-wide	Ben Gurion Airport (Israel), regional bases	Extend range of all combat aircraft; without tankers, fighters cannot reach Iranian targets from distant bases
EA-37B Compass Call	55th Wing, Offutt AFB	2 (first operational deployment)	En route to Middle East via RAF Mildenhall	Stand-off jamming of enemy radars/communications; ISR emitter geolocation; disrupts Iranian C2
EC-130H Compass Call	55th Wing (legacy)	4 remaining	Forward-deployed in theater	Electronic warfare/jamming (older platform being replaced by EA-37B)
EA-18G Growler	Carrier Air Wings	Est. 12+ combined	Aboard carriers	Airborne electronic attack; SEAD escort; jamming of Iranian air defenses during strike packages
E-2 Hawkeye / E-3 Sentry AWACS	Carrier/NATO	Est. 8+	Carriers / Konya Airport (Turkey/NATO), regional	Airborne battle management; control of dozens of aircraft; one destroyed by Iranian missile attack

Table 3. Tier 3: Air Enablers and Force Multipliers

The EA-37B Compass Call deployment is a landmark event. As reported by multiple sources on March 31, 2026, two EA-37Bs (tail numbers 19-1587 and 17-5579) flying as AXIS41 and AXIS43 were en route from the U.S. to RAF Mildenhall and onward to the Middle East. This represents the first-ever operational deployment of the aircraft, which is designed to replace the aging EC-130H fleet. The EA-37B, based on the Gulfstream G550 airframe, provides critical stand-off jamming capabilities against enemy radars and communications systems, and has a secondary ISR function for spotting, tracking, and geolocating emitters. Its destruction would represent both a significant tactical loss and a major propaganda victory for Iran, given the aircraft's status as America's newest electronic warfare platform.

2.4 Tier 4: Naval Forces (Strategic Projection and Fire Support)

Asset	Designation	Status	Ground Attack Role
USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN-72)	CSG-3 Flagship	On station in Arabian Sea / 5th Fleet AOR since Jan 26, 2026	Primary carrier air power projection; Tomahawk land attack; CAS for amphibious operations
USS Gerald R. Ford (CVN-78)	CSG-12 Flagship	Deployed off coast of Israel since late Feb 2026	Second carrier air wing; massive air power redundancy; naval gunfire support
Carrier Strike Group 10	CSG-10 (likely George H.W. Bush)	Reported en route / preparing	Third carrier; would provide unprecedented three-carrier presence

Asset	Designation	Status	Ground Attack Role
Amphibious Ready Groups	ARGs with 31st and 11th MEUs	Afloat in Persian Gulf/Arabian Sea	Transport and landing of Marines; helicopter assault; seizure of coastal objectives
Guided-Missile Destroyers/Cruisers	CG/DDG escorts (Ticonderoga, Arleigh Burke classes)	With carrier groups and in Strait of Hormuz	Tomahawk cruise missile strikes on Iranian coastal defenses; BMD for Gulf states
Littoral Combat Ships	LCS squadron	Operating inside Persian Gulf	Close-in maritime security; anti-swarm boat; support Strait of Hormuz operations

Table 4. Tier 4: Naval Forces Deployed

The concentration of three carrier strike groups (if CSG-10 fully deploys) represents the largest U.S. naval assembly in the region since five carrier battle groups massed for Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. However, this concentration also creates a significant vulnerability: carriers are immense, high-value targets whose loss would be catastrophic both militarily and politically. Iran's anti-ship ballistic missile arsenal, combined with sea mines, fast attack craft, and submarines, makes the Persian Gulf and the northern Arabian Sea a hazardous environment for these vessels. The Strait of Hormuz, through which all carrier groups must pass to enter the Persian Gulf, is only 21 nautical miles wide at its narrowest point, creating a geographic chokepoint that Iran has spent decades preparing to exploit.

2.5 Tier 5: ISR, Command, and Logistics Infrastructure

Asset / Node	Type	Location	Function for Ground Attack
CENTCOM Headquarters	Command Node	Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar	Central nervous system of entire operation; all orders, intelligence fusion, logistics coordination
US Fleet Headquarters Bahrain	Naval Command	Manama, Bahrain (evacuated to <100 personnel)	Command of all naval operations; Iranian drone strike already hit facility in Bahrain
RQ-4 Global Hawk / MQ-4 Triton	High-Altitude ISR UAV	Regional bases (Qatar, UAE)	Persistent surveillance of Iranian troop movements; targeting data for CAS and artillery
RC-135 Rivet Joint	SIGINT Aircraft	Forward-deployed	Intercepts Iranian communications; identifies C2 structures and troop intentions
Forward Support Bases (FSBs)	Logistics Nodes	Multiple locations in GCC states	Fuel, ammunition, medical evacuation, vehicle repair; lifeblood of ground operations
Satellite Constellation	Space-based ISR	Orbit	Target acquisition, damage assessment, route planning for ground advances

Table 5. Tier 5: ISR, Command, and Logistics Infrastructure

3. Critical Enabler Weapons: What Iran Must Target to Cause Disaster

The concept of "enabler weapons" refers to those assets and infrastructure nodes that are not front-line combat platforms themselves, but without which the entire ground operation becomes impossible to sustain or even initiate. A defending Iranian military does not need to defeat U.S. ground forces in direct combat to prevail; it needs only to systematically dismantle the enabling architecture. The following analysis identifies the seven highest-priority targets, ranked by the speed and severity with which their destruction would cascade into operational failure for U.S. ground forces.

3.1 Priority Target 1: Aerial Refueling Tankers (KC-135/KC-46)

Aerial refueling tankers are the most critical vulnerability in the entire U.S. air campaign over Iran. Fighter aircraft operating from carriers in the Arabian Sea or from bases in Israel and Jordan require multiple refuelings per mission to reach targets deep inside Iran, loiter for CAS, and return safely. The U.S. Air Force has approximately 14 tankers staged at Ben Gurion Airport alone, with dozens more scattered across regional bases in Qatar, the UAE, and Jordan. Tankers are large, slow, unmaneuverable, and packed with jet fuel. They follow predictable orbits at known altitudes and are easily detectable by radar. Iran possesses a range of long-range surface-to-air missiles, including the Sayyad-4 and the S-300PMU-2 system, that can engage targets at the altitudes where tankers typically operate.

The loss of even a handful of tankers would have an immediate and catastrophic effect on air operations. Without tankers, F-35Cs from the Ford and Lincoln cannot reach Iranian airspace with meaningful ordnance loads and loiter times. A-10s operating from regional bases would lose their ability to remain on station for extended close air support missions. B-52 bombers, which require extensive tanker support for long-range strike missions from distant bases, would be grounded. The effective combat radius of every aircraft in the theater would shrink dramatically, forcing the U.S. to either accept that ground forces operate without air cover or conduct riskier operations from forward bases closer to Iran, which are themselves vulnerable to missile attack. Iranian strategy should prioritize missile and drone strikes on known tanker orbit areas and the bases where they are parked.

3.2 Priority Target 2: CENTCOM Headquarters and Forward Support Bases

The CENTCOM forward headquarters at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar is the "brain" of Operation Epic Fury. It houses the command staff responsible for orchestrating all air, ground, and naval operations across the theater. The destruction or severe degradation of this facility would produce immediate operational paralysis. Without centralized command, individual units would lose the ability to coordinate with one

another. The Fire Support Coordinator cannot direct artillery; the Air Tasking Order cannot be updated; logistics schedules become chaotic. The effect would be analogous to severing the spinal cord of the entire military apparatus. CENTCOM has acknowledged the vulnerability by evacuating its Bahrain fleet headquarters to fewer than 100 mission-critical personnel and clearing all ships from port, which itself indicates awareness of the threat.

Forward Support Bases (FSBs) throughout the GCC states serve as the distribution hubs for ammunition, fuel, medical supplies, spare parts, and maintenance facilities. An armored column that cannot refuel becomes a stationary target. A tank with a broken track that cannot be repaired becomes a barrier. A soldier who cannot be medically evacuated faces a dramatically increased risk of death. Iran has already demonstrated its willingness and ability to strike these facilities; a drone strike damaged a building in Manama, Bahrain, in the early days of the conflict. A concerted campaign using Iran's inventory of ballistic missiles (Emad, Ghadr, Sejjil series) and cruise missiles (Paveh, Hoveizeh) against known FSB locations would rapidly degrade the sustainment capacity of the entire ground force.

3.3 Priority Target 3: Airborne Early Warning and Control (AEW&C;) Aircraft

E-3 Sentry AWACS and E-2 Hawkeye aircraft serve as the airborne command centers that manage the complex air battle over Iran. They provide radar coverage over hundreds of miles, coordinate the movements of dozens of fighter aircraft simultaneously, detect incoming Iranian missile launches, and direct interceptors toward threats. Iran has already demonstrated its ability to destroy these high-value assets: during the conflict, an E-3 Sentry AWACS was destroyed in an Iranian missile attack, a loss that Iranian Foreign Minister Araghchi publicly referenced in a post featuring a photo of the destroyed aircraft. This single loss represents a template for further action.

Iran's specialized anti-radiation missiles, such as the Shahine system, are designed to home in on the powerful radar emissions of AEW&C; aircraft. If Iran can destroy or force the withdrawal of remaining AWACS platforms, the U.S. air campaign loses its ability to centrally manage air operations. Individual fighters would be forced to rely on their own radars, drastically reducing situational awareness and increasing the risk of fratricide. Without AWACS, Iranian aircraft and drones could exploit gaps in the air defense picture, and the coordination required for complex strike packages would collapse. The targeting of AEW&C; should be a top Iranian priority, using a combination of anti-radiation missiles, long-range SAMs, and coordinated cyber attacks on the datalinks connecting the aircraft to ground stations.

3.4 Priority Target 4: Electronic Warfare Aircraft (EA-37B, EA-18G)

Electronic warfare aircraft are the means by which the U.S. military suppresses and disrupts Iranian air defenses, communications, and radar systems. The newly deployed EA-37B Compass Call and the carrier-based EA-18G Growler are essential to every strike package and every CAS mission, because they

jam Iranian radar systems, disrupt communications between Iranian command posts and their forces, and provide geolocation data for targeting Iranian emitter sites. Without electronic warfare support, Iranian air defenses remain fully functional, and every subsequent strike aircraft faces a dramatically higher risk of being shot down.

The EA-37B is particularly valuable and vulnerable. As a first-of-its-kind deployment, only two aircraft are currently in theater. Their loss would be an asymmetric victory of enormous proportion: a handful of relatively inexpensive Iranian missiles destroying hundreds of millions of dollars in cutting-edge electronic warfare capability. Furthermore, the EA-37B operates from known bases (RAF Mildenhall en route, then forward-deployed locations). Iran's intelligence services, supported by their network of regional proxies and sympathizers, can track these deployments through open-source flight tracking data, which has already revealed their transits and call signs. Targeting these aircraft on the ground at their forward bases with ballistic missile barrages would be the most efficient method of neutralization.

3.5 Priority Target 5: A-10 Warthogs on the Ground or in Transit

The A-10 Warthog is the most critical platform for direct ground force support. It is slow, heavily armored, and carries a devastating 30mm cannon specifically designed to destroy tanks and fortified positions. Unlike fast-moving jets, the A-10 can loiter over a battlefield for hours, providing continuous fire support to ground troops engaged in combat. The A-10 is also uniquely vulnerable. It is not stealthy, it flies low and slow (making it an easy target for MANPADS and short-range SAMs), and it must operate from forward airbases that are within range of Iranian missile systems. Iran's strategy should focus on two approaches: striking A-10s while they are concentrated on the ground at their deployment bases (where 20 aircraft represent a significant and concentrated target), and engaging them in the air using layered air defenses and massed anti-aircraft fire. The loss of the A-10 fleet would leave ground forces without their most effective and dedicated close air support platform.

3.6 Priority Target 6: Maritime Supply Lines and the Strait of Hormuz

All personnel, equipment, fuel, and ammunition for the ground operation must arrive by sea through the Strait of Hormuz or via overland routes through GCC states. The Strait of Hormuz is a 21-nautical-mile-wide chokepoint that Iran has spent four decades preparing to close or control. Iran possesses one of the world's largest stockpiles of naval mines (estimated at several thousand), fast attack craft equipped with anti-ship missiles, midget submarines capable of operating in the shallow Persian Gulf waters, and anti-ship ballistic missiles (the Khalij Fars and its derivatives). By laying extensive minefields at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, Iran can channel all maritime traffic into predictable, narrow corridors that are dominated by Iranian coastal defense batteries and anti-ship missile launchers.

Supply convoys and tankers moving through these channels would face a multi-layered threat: mines to slow or damage them, fast attack craft and one-way attack drones to swarm and overwhelm their defenses, and coastal anti-ship missiles to deliver the killing blow from over the horizon. Even if the U.S. Navy

escorts these convoys, the cumulative effect of constant harassment, the threat of submarine attack, and the risk of losing a major vessel would slow the flow of supplies to a trickle. A ground force that cannot be resupplied within days of landing becomes a stranded, starving, and ultimately defeated force. Iran does not need to sink every ship; it needs only to make the cost of transit unsustainable.

3.7 Priority Target 7: Space-Based and Airborne ISR Platforms

The U.S. military's ability to conduct precision ground operations is entirely dependent on real-time intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance data from satellites, high-altitude drones (RQ-4 Global Hawk, MQ-4 Triton), and signals intelligence aircraft (RC-135 Rivet Joint). This data feeds targeting solutions for CAS, warns of Iranian troop movements and ambush positions, identifies fortified defensive positions, and provides battle damage assessments. Without ISR, ground commanders are operating in the dark. Infantry columns advancing through mountain passes or urban areas without aerial surveillance become targets for ambush. CAS aircraft flying without ISR targeting data risk striking friendly forces or missing their targets entirely.

Iran has multiple vectors to attack ISR capabilities. Advanced SAM systems like the S-300PMU-2 (with a range of approximately 200 km and engagement altitude of 27 km) can threaten high-altitude drones operating near Iranian airspace. Iran's burgeoning anti-satellite capabilities, including both kinetic and directed-energy weapons, could threaten low-earth-orbit surveillance satellites. Cyber operations could corrupt or disrupt data links between satellites and ground stations, or inject false information into the intelligence feed. The systematic degradation of the ISR architecture would not require destroying every platform; it requires only creating enough gaps in coverage that the remaining data becomes unreliable or incomplete, causing commanders to hesitate, slow their advance, and lose the initiative.

4. Scenario A: Turning the Live Operation Into a Disaster

This scenario assumes that Operation Epic Fury has transitioned from air strikes to a ground invasion. U.S. forces have crossed into Iranian territory, either from the west (Iraqi Kurdistan), the south (amphibious assault on Kharg Island or the Iranian coast), or both. The objective is to describe the method by which Iranian forces could transform this invasion into a catastrophic military defeat for the United States, causing heavy casualties, equipment losses, and a forced withdrawal under unfavorable conditions.

4.1 Phase 1: Simultaneous Decapitation of Command and Air Enablers (Hours 0-6)

The moment ground operations commence, Iran must launch a massive, coordinated first strike against the operational "brain" and "eyes" of the invasion force. This means simultaneous ballistic missile barrages

against: (a) CENTCOM headquarters at Al Udeid, Qatar; (b) Forward Support Bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE; (c) known tanker staging bases, particularly Ben Gurion Airport in Israel; (d) A-10 staging bases; and (e) AWACS orbit areas. The key principle is simultaneity: by striking all critical enablers in the same narrow time window, Iran overwhelms the defender's ability to protect all targets simultaneously. No missile defense system, including the Patriot, THAAD, or Aegis BMD, can handle a saturation attack from dozens of ballistic and cruise missiles arriving from multiple directions at the same time.

The expected outcome of this first phase is immediate operational disruption. The command staff at CENTCOM is either killed, wounded, or forced into emergency relocation, paralyzing decision-making for critical hours. Forward Support Bases are damaged, reducing the flow of supplies to advancing ground units. Tanker aircraft are destroyed on the ground or forced to abort their orbits, immediately curtailing the range and loiter time of all combat aircraft. If Iran can destroy even 3-5 tankers in this opening salvo, the effect on air operations would be devastating. A-10s caught on the ground would be eliminated before they can launch their first CAS sorties. The loss of a second AWACS would compound the earlier loss and push the air campaign toward chaos.

4.2 Phase 2: Closing the Strait and Severing Maritime Supply (Hours 6-48)

Within hours of the ground invasion's commencement, Iran must execute a pre-planned operation to mine and blockade the Strait of Hormuz. This would involve laying a dense minefield across the navigable channels using a combination of bottom mines, moored influence mines, and floating mines deployed from small vessels, aircraft, and submarines. Simultaneously, coastal anti-ship missile batteries and fast attack craft would activate to engage any mine-clearing vessels or warships attempting to keep the strait open. One-way attack drone swarms would target any ships that enter the "kill zone" near the Iranian coast.

The strategic effect of closing the Strait is immediate and profound. All seaborne resupply of ground forces in the theater stops. No ammunition, no fuel, no spare parts, no reinforcements can reach the advancing ground units by sea. The overland supply route through Kuwait and Saudi Arabia becomes the sole lifeline, but it is far less efficient, more vulnerable to Iranian proxy attacks in Iraq, and insufficient to sustain a large-scale ground operation. Within days, forward units begin rationing ammunition and fuel. Vehicles break down and cannot be repaired. Medical supplies run short. The ground force begins a slow but inexorable process of attrition that does not require a single Iranian soldier to fire a weapon at them directly.

4.3 Phase 3: ISR Blindness and Air Superiority Erosion (Days 2-7)

With command disrupted and supply lines severed, Iran's next objective is to blind the remaining U.S. forces and strip away their air cover. This is achieved through a sustained campaign against ISR platforms and combat aircraft. Long-range SAMs engage high-altitude drones and reconnaissance aircraft operating near Iranian airspace. Electronic warfare units jam GPS signals, communication frequencies, and the data links connecting U.S. aircraft to their command networks. Cyber operations inject false targeting data into the intelligence feed, causing pilots to strike empty positions or, worse, friendly forces. Simultaneously,

Iran's remaining air defense network draws U.S. strike aircraft into defended kill zones, where layered SAMs and massed anti-aircraft fire inflict steady attrition.

The cumulative effect of these actions is the imposition of "informational darkness" on the advancing ground forces. Infantry columns that were moving confidently under the umbrella of aerial surveillance suddenly find themselves without warning of Iranian troop dispositions ahead. CAS aircraft, unable to receive accurate targeting data from ISR platforms, either cannot find their targets or refuse to risk flying over hostile territory. Ground commanders, lacking situational awareness, are forced to slow their advance to a crawl, providing Iranian defenders with time to reposition, reinforce, and prepare ambushes. The loss of air superiority, or even its significant degradation, transforms the battlefield from one where the U.S. holds all the advantages to one where Iranian forces can maneuver, concentrate, and counterattack on favorable terms.

4.4 Phase 4: Encirclement, Attrition, and Exploitation (Days 7-21)

By the second week of the ground operation, the cumulative effects of the previous phases should have created the conditions for a decisive Iranian counteroffensive. U.S. ground forces, now deprived of reliable air cover, operating with dwindling supplies, and led by a fragmented and degraded command structure, are pushed into a defensive posture. Iranian regular army units, supported by IRGC forces and Basij militia, begin coordinated counterattacks against the flanks and supply lines of the U.S. penetration. Loitering munitions (kamikaze drones) systematically engage isolated vehicles, logistics convoys, and command outposts. In the mountainous terrain of western Iran, Iranian forces establish ambushes along the limited road network, using anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and roadside IEDs to slow and bleed the advancing columns.

The psychological impact on U.S. forces cannot be overstated. Soldiers who are cut off from supply, unable to call for air support, and facing an invisible, knowing enemy suffer a rapid collapse in morale and combat effectiveness. The combination of physical attrition and psychological pressure creates a self-reinforcing cycle of decline: as casualties mount and supplies dwindle, the will to fight erodes, leading to further losses. Iranian proxy forces in Iraq simultaneously attack the overland supply route from Kuwait, interdicting convoys with IEDs, ambushes, and rocket fire. The Houthis, activated by Iran, launch renewed missile campaigns against shipping in the Red Sea and, if within range, against targets in Israel and Saudi Arabia, further stretching U.S. air defense resources. Within three weeks, the ground operation faces an existential choice: escalate dramatically (committing hundreds of thousands of additional troops) or withdraw under fire, suffering the humiliation of a forced retreat.

5. Scenario B: Crippling the Operation Before Ground Operations Commence

The optimal outcome for Iran is to prevent a ground invasion from ever occurring, or to make it so costly in the preparation phase that the political will to launch it evaporates. This scenario examines preemptive and anticipatory strategies Iran can pursue right now, while Operation Epic Fury remains an air and naval campaign, to destroy or disable the critical infrastructure that a ground invasion depends upon.

5.1 Strategic Objective: Raise the Cost Beyond Political Tolerance

The fundamental insight of this scenario is that the United States' political tolerance for casualties and financial cost is finite. The Biden and Trump administrations have both demonstrated sensitivity to military losses that produce domestic political backlash. If Iran can inflict significant casualties and equipment losses on U.S. forces before a ground invasion even begins, while simultaneously creating an economic crisis through the disruption of Gulf oil supplies, the political calculus in Washington may shift against a ground invasion. The key metric is not military defeat on the battlefield but political defeat in Washington, where support for the war is already being questioned. President Trump himself has stated the operation would last "about four to six weeks," and on day 30, the pressure to demonstrate progress or wind down is mounting. Each additional loss of a high-value asset extends this timeline and increases domestic opposition.

5.2 Preemptive Strikes on Staging Areas and Buildup Infrastructure

Iran's most effective preemptive strategy is to target the infrastructure that supports the buildup of ground forces. As of April 1, 2026, the 82nd Airborne Division is still arriving in the Middle East, A-10s are transiting through the UK, and additional carrier groups may still be en route. This buildup phase presents a window of vulnerability: troops and equipment are concentrated at transit points, airbases are crowded with deploying aircraft, and logistics networks are strained by the surge. Iran should exploit this window with missile and drone strikes on: (a) RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall in the UK, where massive numbers of U.S. combat aircraft are staging before onward deployment; (b) Ben Gurion Airport and Ovda Airbase in Israel, which are critical forward operating bases for strike aircraft and tankers; (c) Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan, where F-15Es are stationed; and (d) ports in Kuwait and Bahrain where ground force equipment is being offloaded.

The advantage of targeting the buildup phase is that aircraft and equipment on the ground are far more vulnerable than aircraft in the air. A missile strike on a crowded airbase can destroy multiple aircraft, along with the fuel, munitions, and maintenance infrastructure needed to support them. Iran has already demonstrated its ability to penetrate GCC-state air defenses with drone and missile attacks. A well-coordinated salvo targeting multiple bases simultaneously, arriving from different trajectories and using a mix of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and one-way attack drones, would strain missile defenses to their breaking point. Even if only one or two bases are hit, the damage to aircraft and infrastructure could delay or reduce the ground operation's combat power below the threshold needed for success.

5.3 Activating the Full Proxy Network for Maximum Pressure

Iran's network of proxy and allied forces across the Middle East represents a force multiplier that can be activated to create multiple simultaneous threats, stretching U.S. defenses and political attention. Key actions include: directing the Houthis in Yemen to launch maximum-effort missile and drone campaigns against shipping in the Red Sea and, if possible, against targets in Saudi Arabia and Israel; mobilizing Iranian-backed militias in Iraq to attack the U.S. supply route from Kuwait to the Iranian border, using IEDs, rocket attacks, and ambushes on logistics convoys; encouraging Hezbollah in Lebanon to open a second front against Israel, forcing the U.S. to divert air defense assets and diplomatic attention from the Iranian theater; and potentially activating sleeper cells or cyber capabilities in GCC states to disrupt logistics operations at ports and airbases.

The purpose of these proxy actions is not necessarily to inflict catastrophic damage on their own, but to create a multi-front crisis that forces the U.S. to defend multiple locations simultaneously. Each front requires defensive assets that cannot be used for offensive operations in Iran. The political effect is also significant: each Houthi missile launch, each militia attack on a supply convoy, and each Hezbollah escalation generates media coverage and public pressure that erodes support for the broader campaign. If Iran can create the perception that the entire Middle East is descending into a regional war, the international community, including European and Asian nations dependent on Gulf oil, will intensify pressure on Washington to de-escalate or negotiate.

5.4 Economic Warfare: The Strait of Hormuz as a Lever

Even without a full closure, the credible threat of blocking the Strait of Hormuz gives Iran enormous economic leverage. Iran has already effectively closed the strait to normal commercial traffic; its declaration that the strait is closed, combined with actual attacks on commercial shipping (17 confirmed incidents), has virtually halted maritime commerce through the waterway. The effects are already being felt: the Financial Times reports that the final recorded delivery of jet fuel from the Middle East to the United Kingdom is arriving in April 2026, with no additional shipments in transit. Airline fuel costs are rising. Global oil prices, while managed by strategic reserves in the short term, face long-term upward pressure.

Iran should maintain and intensify this economic pressure by conducting periodic, targeted attacks on commercial shipping that keep insurance rates elevated, discourage vessel transit, and maintain the perception of the Gulf as a war zone. This strategy imposes direct economic costs on the U.S. and its allies, including Gulf states that Trump has asked to help pay for the war. The longer the strait remains disrupted, the more these costs accumulate, and the more domestic and international pressure builds on Washington to seek a negotiated settlement rather than a ground invasion. Iran should couple this with diplomatic overtures, signaling a willingness to restore normal shipping in exchange for concessions on sanctions or the nuclear issue, creating a political off-ramp that makes continued escalation appear increasingly irrational.

5.5 Cyber and Electronic Preemptive Operations

Iran has demonstrated significant capabilities in cyber warfare over the past decade, including attacks on U.S. financial institutions, Saudi Aramco, and critical infrastructure. In the current context, cyber operations serve as a force multiplier for the preemptive campaign. Specific targets include: U.S. military logistics databases and supply chain management systems, which, if corrupted, could cause supplies to be routed to wrong locations or not at all; communications networks used by CENTCOM and deployed units, creating confusion and delays; satellite communications links used by ISR platforms, disrupting the intelligence feed; and public infrastructure in GCC states used to support U.S. operations, such as port management systems, air traffic control, and power generation facilities.

The cumulative effect of a sustained cyber campaign is the erosion of confidence in the digital infrastructure that modern military operations depend upon. If commanders cannot trust their communications, their logistics data, or their intelligence feeds, the pace of operations slows dramatically. Decision-making becomes cautious and delayed. The U.S. military, which is more dependent on networked digital systems than any military in history, is disproportionately vulnerable to this form of attack. Iran does not need to achieve cyber superiority; it needs only to inject enough doubt and confusion into U.S. digital systems to make commanders hesitate at critical moments, slowing the buildup and creating opportunities for kinetic attacks.

6. Composite Vulnerability Assessment

The following table synthesizes all findings into a single prioritized vulnerability matrix, identifying each critical enabler, the Iranian capability best suited to target it, the expected effect of successful neutralization, and the timeline for impact on the ground operation.

Priority	Target (Enabler)	Iranian Capability	Effect of Neutralization	Time to Impact
1	Aerial Refueling Tankers (KC-135/KC-46)	Ballistic missiles (Emad/Ghadr), SAMs on tanker orbits	Fighters cannot reach targets; CAS eliminated; bombers grounded	Immediate (hours)
2	CENTCOM HQ (Al Udeid) and FSBs	Ballistic/cruise missile saturation strikes (dozens of missiles)	Operational paralysis; supply chain collapse; no coordinated orders	Immediate (hours)
3	AEW&C; (E-3 Sentry, E-2 Hawkeye)	Anti-radiation missiles (Shahine), long-range SAMs	Air battle management collapse; loss of radar coverage; fratricide risk	Immediate to 24 hours
4	EW Aircraft (EA-37B, EA-18G)	Ballistic missile strikes on forward bases	Iranian air defenses remain fully active; strike packages degraded	24-48 hours

Priority	Target (Enabler)	Iranian Capability	Effect of Neutralization	Time to Impact
5	A-10 Warthogs	SAMs, MANPADS, missile strikes on airfields	Loss of dedicated CAS; infantry exposed to armor and entrenchments	24-72 hours
6	Strait of Hormuz / Maritime Supply	Mines, fast attack craft, coastal ASCMs, submarines	Supply starvation; no resupply or evacuation by sea	48 hours to 1 week
7	ISR Platforms (drones, satellites, SIGINT)	SAMs, ASAT weapons, cyber attacks on data links	Informational darkness; inaccurate targeting; ambush vulnerability	Days to 1 week

Table 6. Composite Vulnerability Assessment: Priority Targets for Iranian Countermeasures

7. Strategic Conclusions

Operation Epic Fury represents the largest U.S. military deployment to the Middle East in over two decades, assembling a formidable array of naval, air, and ground combat power. However, this analysis demonstrates that the operation's ground component rests on a fragile foundation of enabling infrastructure that is geographically extended, technologically dependent, and inherently vulnerable to asymmetric attack. The defending force's most effective strategy is not to defeat the U.S. military in direct combat but to systematically dismantle the architecture that makes a ground invasion possible.

The evidence converges on a clear conclusion: the single most effective Iranian counterstrategy is a coordinated, multi-domain campaign that simultaneously targets aerial refueling tankers, command and logistics hubs, AEW&C; aircraft, electronic warfare platforms, and maritime supply lines. The destruction or degradation of even a subset of these enablers would cascade rapidly through the operational chain, transforming a technologically superior invasion force into a disorganized, resource-starved, and informationally blind entity. The window for Scenario B (preemptive crippling) is open now, during the buildup phase, when forces are concentrated at staging areas and infrastructure is most vulnerable. Scenario A (disaster after invasion) becomes available the moment ground forces cross into Iranian territory, but its effectiveness diminishes with each day that the U.S. military has to adapt and reinforce.

The fundamental lesson is that in 21st-century warfare, the "last mile" of logistics, communications, and intelligence is where wars are truly won or lost. Iran's geography, its decades of investment in asymmetric capabilities, its deep knowledge of the regional operating environment, and its extensive proxy network combine to create a defensive advantage that no amount of conventional military superiority can easily overcome. The U.S. military's own doctrine acknowledges this vulnerability, which is why the Atlantic Council tracker warns that the operation is "stressing critical military assets that are essential to credibly

deter China." Every asset committed to Iran is an asset unavailable for contingencies in the Pacific, making the cost of failure not just regional but global.

8. Sources and References

[1] Atlantic Council / Scowcroft Center, "Tracking US Military Assets in the Iran War," updated March 28, 2026. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/trackers-and-data-visualizations/tracking-us-military-assets-in-the-iran-war/

[2] Thomas Newdick, "Dozens Of A-10 Warthogs Appear Poised To Join Epic Fury," The War Zone, March 30, 2026. https://www.twz.com/news-features/dozens-of-a-10-warthogs-appear-poised-to-join-epic-fury

[3] "2026 United States military buildup in the Middle East," Wikipedia, continuously updated. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2026_United_States_military_buildup_in_the_Middle_East

[4] Abid Hussain, "War on Iran: What troops is the US moving to the Gulf?," Al Jazeera, March 25, 2026. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/3/25/war-on-iran-what-troops-is-the-us-moving-to-the-gulf

[5] "Thousands of US Army paratroopers arrive in Middle East," multiple outlets, April 1, 2026.

[6] "Iran Builds Layered Missile and Mine Shield Against U.S. Carriers in the Gulf," defense analysis.

[7] "The Strait of Hormuz: Iran's Persistent Control," The Economist / defense analysis, March 27, 2026.

[8] "U.S. Deploys Two EA-37B Electronic Attack Aircraft to UK," multiple OSINT sources, March 31, 2026.

[9] "The U.S. and Iran Are Fighting a Massively Asymmetrical War," The Atlantic, March 25, 2026.

[10] "Anatomy of a Defeat: Targeting the Critical Weaknesses in a Ground Attack on Iran" (reference study).

[11] Forbes, "Trump Warned A Second US Aircraft Carrier Might Be Sent," March 2026.

[12] Financial Times, "Final jet fuel delivery from Middle East to UK," March 30, 2026.