



Iran's Attacks on Shipping Show a Willingness to Hurt the Global Economy

Tensions in the Middle East reached a new level in March as Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps targeted commercial shipping near the Strait of Hormuz. Multiple merchant vessels have been struck in a series of incidents that maritime officials and security firms attribute to Iranian forces. The attacks occurred during a period of open confrontation involving Iran, Israel, and the United States. Analysts warn that these actions threaten one of the most important energy corridors in the world and could trigger serious consequences for the global economy.

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Key Takeaways

- As of March 11, **16 merchant vessels** have been struck^[1] in attacks linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard.
- Six ships were hit in a single wave of incidents in Gulf waters and near the Strait of Hormuz.
- The Strait of Hormuz carries^[2] about **20 percent of the world's oil supply**.
- Iranian officials warned^[3] they will prevent oil shipments from leaving the region.
- U.S. leaders warned that any attempt to block the strait would bring strong military consequences.

The Strait of Hormuz and Its Global Importance

The Strait of Hormuz^[4] sits between Iran and Oman and connects the Persian Gulf to the open ocean. It serves as one of the most important shipping corridors in the world. Energy exports from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and other Gulf states pass through this narrow channel on their way to global markets.

According to energy analysts and international shipping data, roughly **one fifth of the world's oil supply moves through the Strait of Hormuz**. Any disruption to traffic through this waterway can immediately affect global energy prices.

This strategic location has long given Iran a tool of pressure. Iranian leaders have repeatedly threatened to close or disrupt the Strait during the conflict with the United States and Israel. Until recently, those threats remained largely rhetorical. The current wave of attacks suggests a shift from threats to action.

Six Ships Struck in a Single Escalation

Reuters^[1] reported that **six merchant vessels were attacked in Gulf waters and near the Strait of Hormuz**. Maritime security officials and port authorities confirmed the incidents.

Explosive-laden boats believed to belong to Iran's Revolutionary Guard struck two fuel tankers in Iraqi waters. The attacks set the vessels ablaze and killed at least one crew member. Iraqi port security officials reported that oil port operations were halted after the incident.

Other vessels were hit by projectiles or damaged during the same period. A Thailand-flagged bulk carrier suffered damage off the coast of Oman. A Japan-flagged container ship, **ONE Majesty**, and the Greek-owned bulk carrier **Star Gwyneth** sustained minor damage.

Another container ship reported a projectile strike that started a small fire. Maritime monitoring organizations warned that commercial ships have effectively become front-line targets in the regional confrontation.

Sixteen Vessels Targeted Since the War Began

The six attacks reported by Reuters form part of a larger pattern. As of March 11, maritime security reports indicated that **16 vessels have been struck since the beginning of the conflict.**

Shipping companies and insurers have begun treating the region as a high-risk war zone. Insurance premiums for ships passing through the Persian Gulf have surged. Some companies have rerouted vessels to avoid the area entirely.

The disruption has slowed commercial traffic through the Strait of Hormuz. Energy analysts reported that shipping activity has dropped sharply since late February, when the United States and Israel began strikes against Iranian military targets.

Iran's Revolutionary Guard Issues Direct Threats

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has made clear statements about its intentions. Iranian officials declared that if attacks against Iran continue, they would prevent oil shipments from reaching the United States, Israel, or their partners.

One statement from the Revolutionary Guard said they would not allow **"one litre of oil^[5]"** to leave the Middle East under those conditions.

These statements reinforce concerns among security analysts that Iran is willing to disrupt global energy flows as a tool of pressure during the conflict. Even limited attacks can create uncertainty in energy markets and force shipping companies to reconsider routes through the region.

U.S. Warnings and Military Response

The United States has responded with warnings directed at Iran. President Donald Trump stated^[6] that any attempt to block oil shipments through the Strait of Hormuz would lead to stronger U.S. military action.

He argued that shipping companies should continue to use the strait and stated that much of Iran's naval capacity had already been damaged during recent military operations.

The United States Navy maintains a significant presence in the Persian Gulf specifically to keep shipping lanes open. American forces have long treated freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz as a central security interest.

Economic Consequences Already Emerging

The attacks have already affected global energy markets. Oil prices surged to levels not seen since 2022 following the first wave of strikes and shipping disruptions.

Energy traders closely watch developments in the strait because even temporary interruptions can reduce global supply. With about 20 percent of the world's oil moving through the corridor, a sustained shutdown could send prices sharply higher.

Natural gas shipments from Qatar, one of the world's largest exporters of liquefied natural gas, also pass through the strait. Disruption there could affect electricity markets and energy supplies far beyond the Middle East.

The Role of US-Israel Cooperation in Maritime Security

Context: Why Shipping Routes Matter

Maritime security (<https://econora.org/defense-economics/cost-of-security-vs-cost-of-conflict>) is critical in global trade, particularly for protecting [energy trade routes](https://econora.org/resources/economic-maps-charts) (<https://econora.org/resources/economic-maps-charts>). The stability of these sea lanes is vital for predictable commerce, maintaining energy market stability, and controlling insurance premiums and shipping costs.

The **US-Israel economic partnership** integrates maritime security efforts with essential commercial interests. This collaboration mirrors a broader counterterrorism and defense relationship that has developed since the 1970s, as recent analyses of joint frameworks illustrate. Strategies for energy security are central to this partnership, focusing on safeguarding critical infrastructure and ensuring stable energy networks, which are crucial for both nations' economic and national security.

What Cooperation Looks Like in Practice

Current reports on counterterrorism frameworks identify three essential components: **intelligence sharing**, **operational coordination**, and **technology cooperation**. These elements are crucial for quickly identifying threats such as weapons smuggling and financing networks, which are necessary for securing key shipping corridors. American and Israeli cybersecurity teams often collaborate to develop systems that enhance early threat detection in the energy sector.

Defense technology collaboration supplements this framework. Initiatives such as *Iron Dome*, *David's Sling*, and *Arrow* exemplify joint efforts that strengthen air and missile defense capabilities when adversaries threaten ports or coastal infrastructure.

Why It Matters When Countering Iranian-Linked Threats

Analyses indicate that Iranian-backed groups in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria pose ongoing challenges to [maritime security](https://econora.org/defense-economics/cost-of-security-vs-cost-of-conflict) (<https://econora.org/defense-economics/cost-of-security-vs-cost-of-conflict>). Enhanced cooperation enables both nations to proactively detect threats and coordinate responses that protect commercial activities, particularly amidst complex maritime tensions.

- **Faster Warning** through shared intelligence can mitigate risks to energy supply chains.
- **Joint Research and Development** shifts from testing to practical applications, strengthening resilience.
- **Global Resilience Benefits** emerge when critical shipping routes remain open, affecting economic stability.

Policy Recommendations for Addressing Shipping Threats

Start with Risk That Affects Trade and Energy Security

Maritime security is crucial not only for military readiness but also for the stability of global trade (<https://econora.org/trade-and-investment/bilateral-trade-growth>).

When maritime tensions escalate around vital [energy trade routes](https://econora.org/resources/economic-maps-charts) (<https://econora.org/resources/economic-maps-charts>), insurers adjust risk assessments, carriers modify shipping paths, and delivery delays can lead to increased costs for both manufacturers and consumers. These economic repercussions are evident even before actual disruptions occur.

Recent analyses indicate that Iran poses a significant threat to regional stability and international shipping lanes, with U.S. and Israeli efforts aimed at mitigating these risks. As noted in our review of Operation Epic Fury, a primary objective was to limit Iran's capacity to disrupt critical shipping corridors, particularly in areas like the Strait of Hormuz. This aligns with broader discussions on the importance of cybersecurity for safeguarding critical infrastructure, which is essential for maintaining operational continuity in maritime activities.

Practical Steps Policymakers Can Take

Effective policy must recognize that no single solution will suffice. A comprehensive approach typically integrates **deterrence**, **monitoring**, and **commercial continuity**.

- **Enhance maritime domain awareness** by improving shared intelligence, satellite tracking, and established protocols for threat verification prior to escalation.
- **Coordinate convoy and escort operations** with regional allies in high-risk areas, emphasizing clear rules of engagement and deconfliction strategies.
- **Target military supply chains** linked to missile production and exports when warranted, while ensuring that humanitarian trade routes remain open.
- **Bolster port and shipping cyber resilience** through established standards, incident reporting mechanisms, and joint exercises, recognizing that disruptions can be both digital and physical.

A common misconception is that "keeping Iran in the crosshairs" inevitably leads to conflict. As suggested by AllyVia, it can also signify a state of disciplined readiness and clear red lines, coupled with measures that ensure the continuity of commerce.

Conclusion

Iran's attacks on merchant vessels near the Strait of Hormuz represent a serious escalation with global implications. Six ships were struck in one wave of incidents, and between sixteen to eighteen vessels (reports differ) have reportedly been targeted since the conflict began. These actions place commercial shipping directly in the line of fire and threaten one of the most important energy routes on Earth.

The Strait of Hormuz carries roughly one fifth of the world's oil supply, making it a critical link in the global economy. Iran's warnings about halting oil shipments show that its leadership is willing to use that leverage during the confrontation with Israel and the United States.

For policymakers and international observers, the message is clear. The Islamic Republic of Iran's regime will use its proximity to major shipping lanes as leverage now and in the future, and adds an important element to the argument about why the regime needs to be removed.

Footnotes

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Iron Beam: Israel's New Laser Defense System Changes the Economics of Missile Defense


 March 16, 2026 (<https://innovascope.org/2026/03/16/>)

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Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system is widely known for stopping rockets fired by groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. For more than a decade, it has protected Israeli cities from thousands of incoming projectiles. Yet modern conflicts create new challenges. Adversaries have increasingly relied on large numbers of low-cost drones and rockets to overwhelm expensive missile interceptors. Israel's new **Iron Beam** laser defense system addresses that problem by using directed energy instead of traditional missiles. Early operational reports suggest the system can destroy incoming threats at a much lower cost while adding another protective layer to Israel's air defense network.

Key Takeaways

- Israel has begun operational use of the **Iron Beam**^[1] laser air defense system against missile and drone threats.
- The system^[2] uses high-energy lasers instead of interceptor missiles to destroy targets mid-air.
- Each laser interception costs^[3] far less than the missiles used by the Iron Dome.
- Iran and Hezbollah rely on large numbers of inexpensive drones and rockets, which can strain traditional defenses.
- Iron Beam may help Israel maintain^[4] long-term defensive capacity without running out of costly interceptor munitions.

The Challenge of Cheap Rockets and Drones

Over the past decade, groups supported by Iran have invested heavily in rockets, missiles, and unmanned aerial vehicles. Hezbollah in Lebanon had built an arsenal estimated by Israeli and Western analysts to include more than 100,000 rockets and missiles. Many of these weapons are relatively inexpensive and can be produced or assembled quickly.

This strategy creates a basic economic imbalance in modern warfare. A low-cost rocket or drone might cost a few thousand dollars or less. Intercepting it with a traditional missile defense system often requires a far more expensive interceptor.

Israel's Iron Dome^[5] system has performed extremely well in protecting civilian areas. Since its deployment in 2011, it has intercepted thousands of rockets with a reported success rate above 90 percent for threats headed toward populated areas. Each interceptor missile, though, can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

Military analysts have warned that adversaries might try to overwhelm defenses by launching very large numbers of cheap projectiles at once. Iran has invested heavily in drone production and has supplied components and technical support to allied groups across the region.

Introducing the Iron Beam

Israel's answer to this economic challenge is the **Iron Beam** laser defense system. Developed by the Israeli defense company **Rafael Advanced Defense Systems**, the system uses a high-energy laser beam to destroy incoming rockets, drones, and mortar shells.

Instead of firing a missile, the system focuses a powerful beam of light on a target. The energy heats and damages the projectile until it fails in mid-air. This process takes only seconds.

One of the most important advantages of this technology is cost. A laser shot requires electricity rather than a manufactured interceptor missile. Defense officials have stated that each interception could cost only a few dollars worth of power.

The system is designed to work alongside existing defenses such as Iron Dome. Lasers are particularly effective against short-range threats, drones, and rockets fired in large numbers.

First Operational Use in Combat

In early 2026, Israeli defense officials confirmed the first operational^[6] use of the Iron Beam system. According to reports, the laser defense system intercepted missiles launched by Hezbollah from Lebanon during a large overnight attack.

Footage released by Israel's war room showed the laser striking incoming projectiles and destroying them mid-air. Officials described the moment as the first live combat use of the system.

Military leaders said the successful deployment marked a technological milestone. The laser system provided another layer of protection during a period of rising regional tension.

Hezbollah launched the barrage as part of ongoing hostilities connected to broader regional confrontations involving Iran and its allies. Israel responded through military operations coordinated with the United States, which has maintained close security cooperation with Israel for decades.

Why Cost Matters in Missile Defense

Cost differences between offensive weapons and defensive interceptors can shape military strategy. A defending country must maintain enough interceptors to stop incoming attacks over long periods.

Iran and its allied groups have relied on mass production of rockets and drones. Many of these systems use commercially available components, including parts manufactured in China. This makes them relatively cheap to build and deploy.

If large numbers of low-cost drones or rockets are launched at once, defenders may be forced to expend expensive interceptor missiles quickly. Military planners often describe this tactic as attempting to exhaust defensive munitions.

Iron Beam changes that equation. A laser system powered by electricity can fire repeatedly without requiring physical interceptors. As long as the system has power and cooling capacity, it can continue engaging targets.

This allows Israel to reserve traditional interceptor missiles for threats that lasers cannot easily handle, such as long-range ballistic missiles or targets in poor weather conditions.

A New Layer in Israel's Defense Network

Israel already operates one of the most advanced multi-layered air defense networks^[7] in the world. Iron Dome protects against short-range rockets. David's Sling intercepts medium-range threats. The Arrow system counters long-range ballistic missiles.

Iron Beam adds another defensive layer that focuses on cost-effective interception of rockets, drones, and mortar fire. This combination of systems increases the overall resilience of Israel's defenses.

Directed-energy weapons have been studied for decades, but recent advances in laser power and targeting technology have made operational deployment more realistic. Israel's experience with constant rocket threats created strong motivation to push this technology toward practical use.

Conclusion

Israel's Iron Dome became one of the most recognized air defense systems in the world after repeatedly protecting civilian populations from rocket attacks. The arrival of the Iron Beam laser system adds a new element to that defensive architecture. By using energy instead of interceptor missiles, the system addresses the economic challenge posed by cheap rockets and drones used by groups backed by Iran.

Early operational reports suggest that the laser system can destroy incoming threats at a fraction of the cost of traditional interceptors. If widely deployed, Iron Beam could help Israel maintain long-term defensive capacity even during sustained attacks.

For observers in the United States and other allied countries, the development carries broader implications. Directed-energy weapons may play an increasing role in future missile defense systems. Israel's early use of Iron Beam offers a real-world example of how this technology can protect civilian populations against large numbers of incoming threats.

FAQs on Iron Beam: Your Questions Answered

What is the Iron Beam laser defense system?

Iron Beam is an innovative **directed-energy air defense** system developed in Israel, designed to intercept short-range threats...including rockets, mortars, and some drones...using a high-energy laser instead of traditional interceptor missiles. This technology significantly enhances existing defenses by engaging incoming threats at the speed of light, with an extensive “magazine” as long as power is available.

In simple terms, the system aims to:

- **Detect and track** an incoming threat with advanced sensors
- **Point and stabilize** the laser on a small target from a distance
- **Heat a specific spot** long enough to damage the airframe or critical components

The impactful potential of laser technology (<https://innovascope.org/category/news/>) is evident in its ability to reduce per-shot costs and alleviate pressure on interceptor stockpiles. However, it is important to note that lasers are not a standalone solution. Factors such as *weather, line-of-sight, and power requirements* can limit performance, which is why laser defenses are discussed as part of a layered defense strategy (<https://innovascope.org/technology-leadership/space-and-defense-technology/>), an area where the **US–Israel innovation partnership** (<https://innovascope.org/>) excels in developing practical, tested systems.

How does Iron Beam differ from other missile defense systems like Iron Dome?

Iron Dome operates as a *kinetic* interceptor system, launching missiles to neutralize incoming rockets and drones. In contrast, **Iron Beam** utilizes *directed energy*, employing a high-powered laser to disable threats rather than firing interceptors. This fundamental difference impacts cost, logistics, and operational use significantly.

In practical terms, Iron Dome relies on stocked interceptors and carefully managed launch decisions, particularly during large salvos. Iron Beam provides an additional layer where the “ammunition” is electricity, offering a sustainable defense option when power is available.

- **Best use:** Iron Dome for proven interception across varied conditions; Iron Beam as a rapid-response complement for closer-range threats.
- **Cost drivers:** Iron Dome incurs costs per interceptor engagement; Iron Beam’s primary expenses are related to power and system operation.
- **Operational limits:** Lasers can be influenced by weather and line-of-sight conditions, making them optimal when paired with other defense layers.

What are the economic implications of adopting Iron Beam?

The most significant economic impact of Iron Beam lies in its shift in **cost per intercept**. Recent reports indicate that laser shots cost approximately *half a dollar*, compared to interceptor missiles that can exceed \$50,000 each according to AllyVia^[8]. For the U.S., this is particularly critical when defending against low-cost drones and rockets, where expensive missiles can strain defense budgets and stockpiles.

Moreover, Iron Beam can alleviate long-term operational pressures by allowing repeated engagements without depleting missile inventories. It integrates seamlessly with existing radar and command systems (like Iron Dome's) for quicker threat response decisions as noted by AllyVia^[9].

Finally, the adoption of Iron Beam can enhance the **US-Israel innovation partnership** in defense research and development, building on a trade relationship projected at **\$55.0B** in goods and services in 2024 according to Econora^[10].

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Iranian Opposition Unity Offers Hope for a Free and Democratic Iran

For decades, many Iranians have lived under a political system defined by repression, economic hardship, and limited personal freedom. Protest movements across the country demonstrate that dissatisfaction with the Islamic Republic runs deep. Yet the struggle for political change has faced a persistent obstacle: divisions among opposition groups. When dissidents disagree about leadership and the future political system, it becomes harder to present a clear alternative to the ruling regime.

Recent developments suggest that this dynamic may be shifting. Opposition leaders are increasingly calling for unity and cooperation in order to prepare for a democratic transition. A growing number of activists and political figures have rallied around Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi as a unifying^[1] figure capable of bridging ideological divides. For many Iranians who have suffered under decades of authoritarian rule, this emerging unity offers renewed hope that the opposition can organize effectively and lead the country toward freedom.

Key Takeaways

- Iranian opposition groups have long struggled with fragmentation and internal rivalry.
- A growing number of activists and organizations are uniting^[2] around Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi as a national figure who can help coordinate opposition efforts.
- Analysts argue that a unified opposition increases^[3] the likelihood of a successful democratic transition in Iran.
- Protest movements inside Iran show strong public dissatisfaction with the current regime.
- Support from democratic allies such as the United States and Israel could help create conditions for political change.
- For Iranians facing repression, visible unity among opposition leaders strengthens confidence that a democratic alternative exists.

A History of Fragmentation in the

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Iranian Opposition

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, opposition movements outside and inside Iran have struggled to coordinate their efforts. Political groups include monarchists, secular republicans, reformists, ethnic minority movements, and civil society activists. Each group has its own priorities and vision for Iran's future.

These differences often prevented sustained cooperation. Rivalries between organizations and disagreements over leadership frequently stalled coalition-building efforts. According to reporting on Iranian opposition politics, decades of fragmentation allowed the Islamic Republic to maintain control despite widespread dissatisfaction among the population.

The regime also worked actively to deepen divisions. Intelligence operations target^[4] opposition groups abroad and attempt to discredit dissident leaders. By keeping opponents divided, the government reduced the risk of a unified challenge to its authority.

Growing Support for Reza Pahlavi as a Unifying Figure

Recent developments show that many opposition activists are rallying^[2] around Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi as a potential national figure capable of uniting the movement. Reza Pahlavi is the son of Iran's last monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who ruled until the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

According to the National Union for Democracy in Iran, opposition groups and activists increasingly see Pahlavi as a figure who can help coordinate the transition away from the Islamic Republic. His supporters argue that he does not seek absolute power but instead promotes a democratic system where the Iranian people decide the country's future through free elections.

The organization notes that Pahlavi has repeatedly called for a secular democracy in Iran and has supported cooperation among different political groups. His message focuses on national unity and peaceful transition rather than restoring authoritarian rule.

Many activists believe that having a widely recognized national figure helps create cohesion across different parts of the opposition movement.

Why Unity Matters for the Iranian

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For citizens inside Iran, the lack of unified leadership has often weakened protest movements. Demonstrations have erupted repeatedly in response to economic hardship, political repression, and corruption. Despite large numbers of participants, these protests have struggled to produce lasting political change.

A united opposition can address this challenge. When dissident leaders present a clear political alternative, it reassures protesters that their efforts are part of a larger strategy for change.

Unity also reduces fears about instability after the fall of the Islamic Republic. Many Iranians worry that sudden regime collapse could lead to chaos if no organized leadership exists to guide the country through a transition.

By presenting a coordinated front, opposition leaders show that a democratic future is possible and that plans for governance already exist.

International Support and the Role of Democratic Allies

International support may also play an important role in shaping Iran's political future. Democratic allies such as the United States and Israel^[5] have frequently stated that their opposition is directed toward the Iranian regime rather than the Iranian people.

Actions like the joint U.S.–Israel military campaign Operation Epic Fury have targeted the security structures that enforce the regime's authority. These institutions, including units connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have been responsible for suppressing protests and detaining dissidents.

By weakening the regime's ability to use force against its citizens, international pressure may create new opportunities for the Iranian people to organize and pursue democratic reform.

For opposition leaders, cooperation with democratic nations also helps amplify the voices of Iranian activists and bring global attention to human rights abuses inside the country.

Preparing for a Democratic Transition

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Opposition leaders understand that removing the current regime is only the first step. Iran will require stable institutions, economic reform, and national reconciliation after decades of authoritarian rule.

That reality has encouraged activists to develop plans for the future. Discussions among opposition groups increasingly focus on drafting constitutional frameworks, protecting minority rights, and rebuilding the country's economy.

Supporters of unity around Reza Pahlavi argue that a central coordinating figure can help manage these complex tasks during a transitional period. They believe that leadership combined with democratic legitimacy will be necessary to guide Iran through political transformation^[6].

Conclusion

The effort by Iranian opposition leaders to unite marks an important development in the country's long struggle for freedom. For decades, fragmentation among dissident groups has limited their ability to challenge the Islamic Republic effectively. New efforts to build unity, including growing support for Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi as a coordinating figure, suggest that the opposition is attempting to overcome those divisions.

For the Iranian people, this unity carries a powerful meaning. Citizens who have faced repression, economic hardship, and violent crackdowns want reassurance that a viable democratic alternative exists. A coordinated opposition provides that hope.

Support from democratic allies such as the United States and Israel may help create conditions where political change becomes possible. Yet the future of Iran ultimately rests with the Iranian people themselves. If opposition leaders maintain unity and present a clear democratic vision, they may offer the nation its best opportunity in decades to move beyond authoritarian rule and build a free and democratic Iran.

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Kahrizak's Black Body Bags: Leaked Footage Reveals Iran's Violent Crackdown as U.S.–Israel Operation “Epic Fury” Targets the Regime

 March 17, 2026(<https://compassionpulse.org/blog/2026/03/17/>)

Images emerging from Iran in early 2026 present a grim picture of how the Islamic Republic responds to dissent. Leaked video from the Kahrizak Forensic Medical Center outside Tehran shows rows of black body bags and families searching through the dead to identify loved ones. The footage surfaced during a nationwide internet blackout imposed by the Iranian government. Reports indicate that many of the victims took part in demonstrations sparked by rising living costs and worsening economic conditions.

These events unfolded during a period of rising international pressure on the Iranian regime. On February 28, the United States and Israel launched a joint military campaign known as Operation Epic Fury, aimed at degrading the Iranian regime's military capabilities and weakening the leadership responsible for repression at home

and aggression abroad. The scenes from Kahrizak illustrate the brutality faced by ordinary Iranians and provide context for why many observers view the regime as a threat both to its own people and to regional stability.

Key Takeaways

- Leaked footage^[1] from the Kahrizak Forensic Medical Center near Tehran shows dozens of black body bags following anti-regime protests tied to economic hardship.
- Families gathered at the facility searching through the dead to identify missing relatives.
- CNN journalist Hira Humayun reported^[1] that roughly 250 bodies were estimated to be inside the facility based on available information and human rights reporting.
- Videos circulated^[2] despite an Iranian government internet blackout meant to prevent documentation of the crackdown.
- Iranian state television reportedly aired some of the images as a warning to protesters.
- The killings^[3] occurred during nationwide protests from December 2025 to January 2026 over rising living costs.
- The United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury, targeting the regime responsible for both regional aggression and repression of Iranian citizens.

Economic Protests Turn Deadly

Iran experienced large demonstrations^[4] from December 2025 through January 2026. Protesters rallied in response to rising prices, unemployment, and the declining value of the Iranian currency. Many Iranians reported difficulty affording basic goods such as food, housing, and fuel.

The demonstrations spread across multiple cities and involved students, workers, and middle-class families. Protesters criticized government corruption and demanded accountability from the ruling authorities. Iran has experienced similar unrest in recent years, including the nationwide protests of 2019 and the demonstrations following the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022.

Authorities responded with overwhelming force. Security units connected to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and other state security bodies were deployed to disperse crowds with murderous violence. Arrests followed across the country and communications networks were restricted in an effort to limit the spread of protest footage.

Human rights groups have long documented the Iranian government's willingness to use lethal force against its own citizens during periods of unrest.

The Leaked Footage From Kahrizak

In March, CNN published a report^[1] by journalist Hira Humayun based on leaked footage from the Kahrizak Forensic Medical Center south of Tehran. The videos show distressed families gathered around rows of black body bags inside the facility and on walkways outside the building.

According to CNN's reporting, people cried out in anguish as they searched for relatives among the bodies. Some scenes showed warehouse-like rooms filled with corpses wrapped in black plastic.

One clip shows a crowd standing in front of a monitor displaying photographs of deceased individuals. Families attempted to identify loved ones by comparing those images to missing relatives. Information visible on the screen and data collected by the US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency suggested that around 250 bodies were present at the site.

Another video shows dozens of body bags lined along an outdoor walkway beside the facility. The number of dead appears to have exceeded the building's capacity.

The footage managed to circulate despite an Iranian government internet blackout intended to prevent such evidence from reaching the outside world.

State Television Used the Images as a Warning

One striking element of the story is that Iranian state television reportedly aired some of the footage. Instead of concealing the scale of the deaths, authorities used the images as a message directed at protesters.

State-controlled media in Iran functions as a primary communication tool for the government. Broadcasting the aftermath of the crackdown may have served as an attempt to intimidate citizens considering joining demonstrations.

Public fear^[5] has long played a role in maintaining the regime's authority. Arrests, imprisonment, and force remain common responses when citizens challenge the leadership.

Operation Epic Fury and International Response

The violent repression of protesters has drawn increasing attention from the international community. On February 28, the United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury, a joint military campaign directed at the Iranian regime's military and security infrastructure.

The operation targeted facilities linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, missile production, and command structures used by the regime. Officials in Washington and Jerusalem describe^[6] the campaign as part of a broader effort to weaken a government responsible for destabilizing activities across the Middle East and brutal treatment of its own population.

American and Israeli leaders have frequently pointed^[7] out that the Iranian people themselves are not the enemy. Many Iranians have protested the regime repeatedly, risking arrest or death. The images from Kahrizak demonstrate the consequences faced by those who speak out.

Weakening the regime's power structures could create space for the Iranian people to pursue political change without facing the same level of violent repression.

The Role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, recognized^[8] as a terrorist organization around the world, stands at the center of Iran's security system. Founded after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the organization functions as both a military force and a political authority inside the country.

The IRGC plays a major role in suppressing domestic unrest. During previous protest waves, security units under its command have used live ammunition, mass arrests, and detention centers to control demonstrators.

The images from Kahrizak suggest that the crackdown following the recent protests produced a large number of deaths. The Iranian government rarely releases full casualty numbers, leaving journalists and human rights organizations to assemble evidence through leaked footage and eyewitness testimony.

Conclusion

The footage from the Kahrizak Forensic Medical Center offers a stark view of Iran's treatment of citizens who challenge the ruling regime. Families searching through rows of black body bags represent the human cost of protests that began over economic hardship and political frustration.

Reporting from CNN and human rights organizations suggests that hundreds of victims may have passed through the facility. The Iranian government attempted to control the narrative through internet shutdowns and state media messaging.

These events occurred as the United States and Israel began Operation Epic Fury, a campaign aimed at weakening the regime responsible for both regional aggression and repression at home. The scenes from Kahrizak underline why many observers believe that the Iranian people face a government willing to use lethal force against its own population.

Continued international attention remains important as the world watches how the Iranian regime responds to dissent and how the Iranian people pursue freedom and accountability in the face of severe repression.

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Malicious Foreign Accounts Are Driving Viral Anti-U.S. and Anti-Israel Narratives Online

The information battlefield has become a major front in modern conflicts. During the latest confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran, social media platforms are filled with viral content attacking the U.S. military operation known as "Operation Epic Fury." A closer examination of online activity shows that much of this content did not originate in the United States. Investigations into the viral posts reveal that foreign accounts played a major role in amplifying anti-American and anti-Israel narratives. This activity highlights how foreign governments and coordinated networks use social media to influence public opinion during international crises.

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Key Takeaways

- Many viral posts criticizing **Operation Epic Fury** on social media were driven^[1] by accounts located outside the United States.
- Research has identified networks tied to Iran's **Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)** spreading^[2] anti-U.S. and anti-Israel messaging.
- Some accounts posed as Western users from the United States, the United Kingdom, or Ireland.
- Analysts report^[3] coordinated posting patterns and the use of AI-generated media to spread misleading claims.
- These campaigns attempt to shape global perception of the conflict and weaken support for the United States and Israel.

Foreign Influence in the Online Conversation

Analysis^[1] found that many of the most visible anti-Operation Epic Fury posts on X came from accounts located outside the United States. These accounts generated and amplified narratives criticizing American and Israeli actions in the conflict.

The research indicated that foreign users were responsible for a disproportionate share of the most viral posts attacking the operation. Some accounts appeared to be connected to networks that regularly push pro-Iran messaging online.

This pattern reflects a broader trend seen in many geopolitical conflicts. Governments and political groups attempt to influence public opinion in rival countries by shaping the conversation on social media.

The goal is simple. If large numbers of people in the United States begin to doubt their own government's actions or the reliability of their allies, political pressure may grow to change policy.

Networks Linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard

Recent investigations by researchers and journalists have identified social media networks connected to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These networks use dozens of accounts across several platforms.

A report^[2] cited by Fox News Digital and academic researchers found **at least 62 accounts tied to the IRGC** spreading anti-Israel and anti-American messaging online.

Many of these accounts claimed to belong to ordinary users from the United States or Europe. Some profiles said they were located in England, Scotland, or Ireland. Investigators later found connections linking them to Iranian sources.

Researchers said these accounts systematically promoted content designed to deepen political divisions. Their posts often included misinformation, manipulated videos, or AI-generated images related to the conflict.

The campaign expanded rapidly after the February 28 strikes carried out by the United States and Israel against Iranian targets.

AI and Viral Misinformation

Another element of the campaign involves artificial intelligence. Investigators have documented cases where fabricated images and videos were used to create dramatic but false narratives.

In some cases, AI-generated videos or images were shared widely before fact-checkers identified them as fake. These posts often claimed to show destroyed military bases or successful Iranian attacks that never occurred.

Researchers found that some videos circulating online were actually clips from video games presented as real combat footage.

The combination of emotionally charged messaging^[4] and visual media makes these posts particularly effective at spreading quickly. Social media algorithms often promote content that generates strong reactions, which helps misinformation travel far beyond its original source.

Why Foreign Influence Campaigns Matter

Information operations have long been part of international conflict. During the Cold War, Soviet intelligence services attempted to influence public opinion abroad through propaganda and covert media campaigns.

Social media has made these tactics easier to execute. A small network of coordinated accounts can reach millions of people within hours.

In the current conflict, Iran benefits from narratives that weaken support for Israel and the United States. If public pressure grows against American involvement in the conflict, Iran gains a strategic advantage without firing a single missile.

Security analysts warn that these campaigns aim to create confusion rather than simply promote one political view. When citizens struggle to distinguish between reliable information and fabricated claims, trust in institutions can weaken.

The Role of Technology Platforms

Technology companies face increasing pressure to respond to coordinated disinformation campaigns. Platforms such as X, Instagram, and others have removed networks linked to state-backed propaganda when evidence becomes clear.

Researchers and policy experts continue to debate how best to address the problem. Some argue for stronger verification requirements for accounts discussing major geopolitical events. Others warn that excessive restrictions could limit legitimate debate.

What remains clear is that social media has become a central battleground for modern information warfare.

Conclusion

The online debate surrounding Operation Epic Fury offers a clear example of how foreign influence campaigns operate in the digital age. Investigations show that many of the most visible anti-operation posts were driven by accounts outside the United States, including networks linked to Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

These campaigns often rely on fake identities, coordinated posting patterns, and AI-generated media to shape public perception. Their goal is not simply to express an opinion. They seek to influence how millions of people understand a conflict involving the United States and Israel.

For readers and social media users, the lesson is straightforward. Viral content does not always reflect genuine grassroots opinion. During international crises, some of the loudest voices online may actually originate thousands of miles away.

Frequently Asked Questions on Malicious Foreign Accounts

What are malicious foreign accounts and how do they operate online?

Malicious foreign accounts (<https://cognitura.org/blog/behind-the-spontaneous-protests-how-organized-china-based-networks-mobilized-demonstrations-against-the-u-s-iran-operation>) are online profiles...managed by individuals, coordinated teams, or automated systems...operating from outside a target country with the intent to manipulate public discourse. Their primary goal is to fracture trust, incite division, and influence opinions by disseminating **propaganda** or misleading information. These accounts often blend seamlessly into everyday online conversations: they adopt common profile pictures, utilize local slang, and share ordinary posts to establish credibility. When engagement peaks, they introduce emotionally charged narratives (<https://cognitura.org/emotional-vulnerability-and-fear>). *Current trends indicate* that these networks frequently collaborate across various platforms, repeating claims until they become familiar and accepted. Furthermore, they may disrupt legitimate online interactions, similar to tactics used in cyber attacks that interfere with website functionality.

- **Impersonation:** masquerading as local activists, news outlets, or community members

- **Amplification:** boosting specific hashtags, videos, or rumors through coordinated sharing efforts
- **Engagement bait:** provoking confusion, anger, or fear to drive comments and re-shares
- **Recruitment touchpoints:** guiding users toward closed groups, channels, or “exclusive” links

A practical check for ordinary users: be wary of inconsistent bios, repetitive talking points across multiple accounts, and sudden surges of coordinated replies.

How do these accounts contribute to anti-U.S. and anti-Israel narratives?

These accounts amplify **propaganda** by selectively repeating misleading claims that portray the U.S. and Israel as uniquely detrimental while downplaying context or evidence. This often occurs through emotionally charged posts prioritizing outrage over accuracy. They typically promote a simplified narrative by:

- **Cherry-picking** real events while omitting timelines, sources, or legal context
- Employing **dehumanizing language** or broad blame that shifts focus from policies to entire populations
- Recycling **conspiracy narratives** that depict institutions and media as coordinated deceivers
- Overwhelming replies with “proof” that consists of *out-of-context* videos, recycled images, or unverifiable screenshots

The cumulative effect is a gradual drift toward **indoctrination**: audiences learn to distrust all corrective information, viewing disagreement as betrayal. Combatting this requires a commitment to **media literacy**...verifying original sources, comparing multiple outlets, and pausing before sharing content designed to provoke strong emotions. For insights on how malicious activities can disrupt online environments, refer to our [terms of use page \(https://cognitura.org/terms-of-use\)](https://cognitura.org/terms-of-use).

What psychological mechanisms do these narratives exploit to recruit individuals?

Narratives aimed at extremist recruitment often exploit fundamental human needs... belonging, meaning, safety, and status...redirecting these needs towards an ideology of control. They combine **emotion-first messaging** with simplistic explanations that provide comfort amid confusion.

Common tactics include:

- **Belonging cues:** creating instant community, loyalty tests, and “we see you” validation.
- **Grievance amplification:** framing genuine frustrations as evidence of a singular enemy or oppressive system.
- **Moral disengagement:** employing *dehumanizing* or blame-laden language to dull empathy and justify harm.

- **Identity fusion:** linking self-worth to group identity so leaving feels like betrayal.
- **Fear and urgency:** “act now” messages that discourage critical reflection and questioning.

Their strategy often involves **incremental commitment:** starting with seemingly innocuous content before escalating to more extreme claims once trust is established. Prevention begins with truth-centered education, media literacy, and fostering **moral resilience:** the practice of pausing, verifying, and prioritizing dignity over outrage.

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Operation Epic Fury Is a Strategic Disaster for China

Operation Epic Fury, the joint military campaign launched by the United States and Israel on February 28 against the Iranian regime, represents more than a regional military operation. It has reshaped the balance of power across the Middle East and exposed major weaknesses in China's geopolitical strategy. For years, Beijing relied on Iran as a partner that could challenge Western influence and strengthen a growing anti-Western alignment with Russia and North Korea.

The campaign has placed China's leadership in an uncomfortable position. Iran was a central pillar of Beijing's foreign policy in the Middle East and a major source of energy for the Chinese economy. As American and Israeli forces dismantle Iran's military infrastructure and weaken the regime responsible for repression at home and aggression abroad, China's influence in the region faces serious damage. The operation highlights the broader struggle between democratic nations and authoritarian regimes over the future balance of global power.

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Key Takeaways

- Operation Epic Fury began^[1] on February 28 as a joint U.S.–Israel military campaign targeting Iran’s military and security infrastructure.
- Iran served as a strategic partner^[2] for China and a key piece of Beijing’s global geopolitical strategy.
- China purchased about 1.38 million barrels of Iranian oil per day and took more than 80 percent of Iran’s oil exports.
- The weakening of Iran removes a major regional partner^[2] that helped Beijing challenge Western influence.
- The campaign^[3] exposes flaws in China’s narrative that the United States is a declining power.
- Operation Epic Fury fits into a wider geopolitical contest^[4] between democratic countries and authoritarian regimes aligned with China.

Iran’s Role in China’s Global Strategy

For years, China viewed Iran as a valuable strategic partner in the Middle East. Beijing signed a long-term cooperation agreement with Tehran and invested billions of dollars in Iranian energy and infrastructure projects. The relationship provided China with discounted oil and allowed it to bypass Western sanctions.

China relied^[5] heavily on Iranian energy supplies. Reports indicate that Beijing purchased about 1.38 million barrels of Iranian oil each day and accounted for more than 80 percent of Iran’s oil exports.

This arrangement helped China maintain steady access to energy while strengthening a geopolitical alignment^[6] that included Russia and North Korea. The relationship served a larger goal within Beijing’s foreign policy: weakening the influence of the United States and its allies in key regions of the world.

Iran played a major role in that effort. A defiant Tehran kept American attention focused on the Middle East and allowed China to expand economic and diplomatic ties across the region.

Operation Epic Fury Shakes Beijing's Assumptions

The launch of Operation Epic Fury disrupted^[3] those calculations. The campaign rapidly targeted Iranian military capabilities and leadership structures that had taken decades to build.

According to an analysis published^[3] by the Hudson Institute, the strikes created unusual uncertainty within China's leadership. Beijing had long believed that American power in the region was limited and that Iran would continue to resist pressure from the United States.

That belief formed part of a broader narrative promoted by Chinese leader Xi Jinping. Xi repeatedly argued that Western influence was declining^[7] while China's global position was rising.

The rapid success of a coordinated U.S.–Israel military campaign challenges that narrative. If American and Israeli forces can dismantle a major regional ally of China within days, it raises serious questions inside Beijing about the reliability of China's geopolitical strategy.

Energy and Economic Consequences for China

Operation Epic Fury carries economic consequences for China as well. Beijing relies heavily on energy imports from the Persian Gulf, and Iran served as a major supplier.

Chinese refineries often purchased Iranian oil at significant discounts. These lower prices allowed Chinese energy companies to maintain high production levels while controlling costs.

The disruption of Iran's oil exports creates immediate problems for that system. Chinese refiners may now have to purchase oil at higher market prices from other suppliers. Analysts warn that energy shocks in the Gulf region can ripple through China's economy, affecting manufacturing and transportation costs.

China's investments in Iran are also at risk. Chinese companies and banks poured billions of dollars into Iranian infrastructure and industrial projects over the past decade. The weakening of the Iranian regime raises uncertainty about whether those investments will produce returns.

The Broader Contest Between Democratic and Authoritarian Powers

Operation Epic Fury carries significance far beyond Iran or the Middle East. Many analysts view the campaign as part of a wider global contest between democratic nations and authoritarian governments aligned with China.

Iran, Russia, North Korea, and China have strengthened ties^[6] in recent years. Each of these governments shares an interest in weakening the influence of the United States and its allies.

The removal of Iran as a strong regional actor disrupts that alignment. It reduces China's ability to project influence in the Middle East and limits the strategic depth of the broader anti-Western partnership.

At the same time, the operation highlights the strength of the U.S.–Israel alliance. The two countries combined intelligence, military technology, and operational planning to carry out strikes that dramatically altered the regional balance.

For many observers, the campaign sends a message that democratic nations remain capable of decisive action when confronted with threats to stability and security.

Why the Iranian People Matter in This Conflict

The Iranian regime has long faced criticism for its treatment of its own population. Protests over economic hardship and political repression have repeatedly erupted across the country.

Recent leaked footage^[8] from facilities such as the Kahrizak Forensic Center near Tehran has shown the human cost of those crackdowns. Families searching through rows of black body bags highlight the brutality faced by citizens who challenge the government.

Many supporters of Operation Epic Fury argue that weakening the regime's security apparatus may create new opportunities for the Iranian people to pursue political change.

While the future of Iran remains uncertain, the events surrounding Epic Fury show how domestic repression and international conflict are closely connected.

Conclusion

Operation Epic Fury represents a major turning point in Middle Eastern geopolitics and in the broader competition between democratic and authoritarian powers. The campaign struck directly at the Iranian regime, a government that served as one of China's most important partners outside Asia.

The weakening of Tehran disrupts Beijing's energy supply chains, undermines Chinese investments, and challenges the narrative promoted by Chinese leadership about declining Western influence. Iran once served as a key pillar supporting China's ambitions in the Middle East. That pillar now appears significantly weakened.

For the United States and Israel, the operation demonstrates the strength of their strategic partnership and their willingness to confront regimes that threaten regional stability. The consequences extend well beyond Iran itself.

The outcome of Operation Epic Fury will shape global politics for years to come. The campaign highlights a central question facing the international community: whether democratic nations can maintain stability and freedom in the face of authoritarian powers seeking greater influence around the world.

Footnotes

1. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2026/03/operation-epic-fury-unmatched-power-unrelenting-force-of-americas-warriors/> (https://www.whitehouse.gov/articles/2026/03/operation-epic-fury-unmatched-power-unrelenting-force-of-americas-warriors/). ■
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2044vzrdpzo> (https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c2044vzrdpzo). ■
3. <https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/why-operation-epic-fury-catastrophic-xi-zineb-riboua> (https://www.hudson.org/foreign-policy/why-operation-epic-fury-catastrophic-xi-zineb-riboua). ■
4. <https://www.jpost.com/business-and-innovation/article-889773> (https://www.jpost.com/business-and-innovation/article-889773). ■
5. <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/chinas-heavy-reliance-iranian-oil-imports-2026-01-13/> (https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/chinas-heavy-reliance-iranian-oil-imports-2026-01-13/). ■
6. <https://www.politico.eu/article/crink-new-axis-of-evil-nato-china-russia-iran-north-korea/> (https://www.politico.eu/article/crink-new-axis-of-evil-nato-china-russia-iran-north-korea/). ■

7. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2026/03/05/the-missile-saturation-gambit-chinas-strategy-to-lure-american-and-israeli-firepower-into-a-costly-trap/>
(<https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2026/03/05/the-missile-saturation-gambit-chinas-strategy-to-lure-american-and-israeli-firepower-into-a-costly-trap/>) ■
8. <https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/12/world/video/iran-body-bags-line-the-street-near-tehran-vrtc-digvid> (<https://edition.cnn.com/2026/01/12/world/video/iran-body-bags-line-the-street-near-tehran-vrtc-digvid>) ■

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