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Issue Brief

'Boots on the Ground' In Iran: An Assessment

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March 30, 2026

S*ummary*

Modern capabilities in airpower, including PGMs, long-range rockets, BVR missiles and drones, provide an unusually seductive form of military strength, enabling non-contact lethal military options. However, even without the goal of 'regime change' in Iran, the scope of the objectives set by both countries may require a level of 'control' that US /Israel forces, with airpower alone, may find difficult to achieve.

Introduction

‘Operation Epic Fury’ and ‘Operation Rising Lion’ initiated on February 28, 2026, denote the most significant escalation of U.S. and Israeli military actions in the Middle East since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Unlike previous military actions, such as the twelve days of aerial strikes in June 2025 (Operation Midnight Hammer), the current campaign seems oriented towards weakening the regime and the permanent dismantling of the Islamic Republic’s strategic military capabilities.¹ In its fifth week, as the war outcomes remain unclear, the dilemma of US/Israeli planners to place boots on the ground to obtain a tangible marker of victory continues. This brief attempts to highlight the challenges of placing ‘boots on the ground’ to achieve the laid-down politico-military objectives in the ongoing conflict with Iran.

Politico-Military Objectives

To achieve the above end state in Iran, the likely politico-military objectives set by both countries are listed below:-

<u>USA</u>	<u>Israel</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Weakening of the current clerical regime• Deny Iran the ability to develop a nuclear weapon• To destroy its missile arsenal, including its manufacturing and launchers• To end the Islamic Republic’s support for terrorism and such proxies as Hamas and Hezbollah; to weaken the regime• Unconditional Surrender (6 March 2026)²• Destroy Iranian defence industrial base & protect allies in the region (21 March 2026)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• End the threat from the regime in Iran; create conditions for the overthrow of the government• Prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon• To destroy Iran’s ballistic missile and drone capabilities• To weaken Iran’s regional military reach and to cripple/make inoperable Iran’s military command networks for a prolonged period.

¹ Mohamed Chtatou, “[The War Against Iran: Analysis](#)”, *The Times of Israel*, 21 March 2026.

² Truth Social, [@realDonaldTrump](#), 6 March 2026.

The current U.S. administration has framed the ongoing operation as a ‘laser-focused’ mission³ to destroy threats rather than a ‘utopian’ exercise in nation-building. Given the political and military objectives, two critical aspects must be addressed by strategic planners before deploying any ‘boots on the ground’.

- Does the laid down politico-military objective require the physical presence of troops for its realisation and enforcing its will on the enemy? In the case of the Iraq War, the stated objective was the removal of Saddam Hussein & Ba’ath party from power, which necessitated the deployment of ground forces and the execution of Op Iraqi Freedom. In comparison, despite various rhetorical commentaries on Op Epic Fury, the official statements have not laid down regime change as its politico-military objective. This distinction is essential to understanding how the military force may be applied to achieve its end state. Despite this, the US President and the Secretary of the Department of War have also not ruled out the possibility of putting boots on the ground.
- The second aspect is how much force levels are essential to achieve the given objective with minimum cost/risk to the state. Though purely a military matter in campaign planning, it requires greater consideration by both political and military strategic decision-makers. Any force levels below the required level may trigger a severe setback or shortfall in achieving the end state; however, the commitment of ground forces may also lead to a prolonged and increasing need for resources over time. The strategic prudence will lie in reducing both monetary and human costs to realise the objectives, as experience in the region reflects a high cost-to-benefit ratio for Washington.

The initial phases of the campaign in Iran have successfully leveraged stealth aviation and long-range precision-guided munitions to decapitate the senior leadership including the confirmed death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei – thereby opting for low risk option however the plan (if any) for "regime change" will necessitate a ground component to ensure that the resulting power vacuum is not merely replaced by mid-level IRGC leadership or radicalized sectarian factions. Even without the goal of regime change, the scope of the objectives set by both Israel & the US may require a level of "control" that US forces, with airpower alone, may find difficult to achieve⁴.

The quantum of forces is not the sole metric here, as the US buildup continues, but rather an indicator of the scope and feasibility of ground operations. A brief overview of the opposing forces in the region will be essential to understanding the likely military strategy and the options available to each side.

³ C. Todd Lopez, [“Hegseth says ‘Epic Fury’ goals in Iran are ‘laser-focused’”](#), Air National Guard, 4 March 2026.

⁴ Michael R. Gordon, [“U.S. and Israeli Military Campaign Tests Limits of Air Power”](#), *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 2026.

Iran⁵

Analysis of Iran's current military strength reveals a force designed for deterrence and regional contingencies with a mix of conventional and asymmetric capabilities.

The Iranian military structure is divided into two parallel organisations: the regular army (Artesh) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), each with distinct roles and varying levels of loyalty to the surviving interim leadership.

- The Iranian Armed Forces represent the largest active-duty military in West Asia. However, their effectiveness is currently hampered by the decapitation of the General Staff and the disruption of centralised command and control (C2)⁶.

Service Branch	Active Personnel	Reserves / Paramilitary	Notes
Artesh (Regular)	~4,02,000	~2,00,000	Primarily focused on conventional territorial defence; perceived as less ideologically committed than the IRGC.
IRGC (Sepah) incl Quds Force	~1,70,000	~4,50,000-6,00,000 (Basij)	Principal defender of the revolution; controls the missile arsenal and proxy networks.
Law Enforcement Command(LEC)	~2,00,000	N/A	Responsible for internal security, anti-riot, and border guards
Navy (Combined)	~40,000	N/A	Defend territorial waters and protect economic interests; asymmetric warfare in the littoral.

.***Note:** The manpower shown is approximate, obtained from open source

5. Farhad Rezaei, “[Iran’s Military Capability: The Structure and Strength of Forces](#)”, Insight Turkey, 22 May 2019.

6. Sascha Bruchmann and Air Marshal (Retd) Martin Sampson, “[US-Israel Campaign in Iran](#)”, The International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2 March 2026.

Broad Disposition of Iranian Forces: Iranian forces are deployed in a decentralised manner, into 31 provincial commands⁷ and 50 brigades⁸. This decentralisation is part of its ‘mosaic doctrine’, intended to allow local units to continue fighting even after the collapse of the national government in Tehran. An open-source analysis of military bases and a country’s geography indicates the likely disposition of Iranian forces before operations commence.

- **Tehran and Central Plateau:** The highest concentration of IRGC Ground Forces and Basij paramilitary units is located in and around the capital to prevent popular uprisings and defend the seat of government.
- **Northwestern Border** (Kurdistan/West Azerbaijan): This region is heavily fortified by Artesh to counter Kurdish separatist groups and potential incursions from Iraq.
- **Southwest** (Khuzestan): As the primary oil-producing region, the area of Khuzestan is a strategic priority. Deployment here is focused on protecting critical infrastructure and managing ethnic unrest.
- **Southern Coastal Belt:** The IRGC Navy and anti-ship missile units are concentrated around Bandar Abbas, Bushehr, and Chabahar, aiming to secure their own interests and maintain control over movement in the Persian Gulf.

Current U.S. Ground Force Deployment in the Region

As of early March 2026, the U.S. military presence in West Asia is heavily weighted toward naval and air assets, with limited ground forces⁹. The distribution of forces is as follows:-

Country	Primary Bases	Ground Personnel*	Principal Units / Function (Open source-based)
Kuwait	Camp Arifjan / Camp Buehring	~13,000	US Army Central HQ; 1st Theatre Sustainment Command

7. Manoj Joshi, “[How Iran is Fighting This War in a Different Way](#)”, The Wire, 16 March 2026.

8. Nicholas Carl, “[Explainer: The Iranian Armed Forces](#)”, Institute for the Study of War, 17 June 2025.

9. Mark F. Cancian and Chris H. Park, “[U.S. Military in the Middle East: Numbers Behind Trump’s Threats Against Iran](#)”, Center for Strategic and International Studies, 20 February 2026.

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Qatar	Al-Udeid Air Base	~10,000	CENTCOM Forward HQ; 379th Air Expeditionary Wing
Saudi Arabia	Prince Sultan Air Base	~2,300	Air/Missile defence (Patriot/ THAAD batteries).
Jordan	Muwaffaq al Salti	~3,000	332nd Air Expeditionary Wing; SOF liaison teams.
Iraq / Syria	Erbil / Al Asad / Al Tanf	~3,500	Counter-ISIS advisors; OIR remnants; Kurdish liaison.
Israel	Ovda / Ben Gurion	~500+	Logistic specialists; Air Force technical teams (F-22 support).
US Force Levels* for Epic Fury (EU & Middle East)			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carrier Battle Group – 02 • Naval warships – 25 (11 EUCOM/14 CENTCOM) • Submarines – 02 • Troops in Transit 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fighter A/c - 292 (143 EUCOM + 149 CENTCOM) • Naval Strike A/c -18 Sqn (270 approx) • Support A/c – 76 	
<p>82nd Airborne & 11th MEU (7000 troops approx)</p>			

***Note:** The force levels are dynamic and may vary based on the progress of operations.

This deployment profile of the U.S., at least for now, indicates that while the U.S. can sustain a "punitive strike" or "regime disruption" campaign from the air, it is not intending regime change or securing any part of Iranian territory, as it does not currently possess adequate "boots on the ground" for the same. For the Iranian state, the mere strength of its fighting forces provides it with adequate defensive capability while raising the cost for the adversary. The force levels of the US/Israel align with current politico-military objectives by employing degradation through kinetic-non-contact warfare; however, in all likelihood, US military planners would have prepared for all contingencies, including the possibility of a ground offensive or special operations, depending on the progress of operations.

Envisaged Role of Ground Forces

A historical review of past operations in the region, with the changing role of ground forces, has resulted in varying degrees of success for US/coalition forces.

Operation	Year	Goal	Role of Ground Force	Result
Desert Storm	1991	Liberation of Kuwait	Expulsion of enemy forces; limited incursion.	Conventional victory; Iraqi regime persisted.
Desert Fox	1998	Attrition	None (Air/Missile only).	Degraded WMD program; Iraqi regime sustains.
Iraqi Freedom	2003	Regime Change	Full invasion; urban occupation.	Iraqi regime removed; decade-long insurgency & instability; increased influence of Iran in the region.
Midnight Hammer	2025	Counter-Proliferation	None (Air/Missile only).	Facilities damaged; program delayed
Epic Fury	2026	Regime Disruption / Weakening	TBD (Currently Air/Missile).	Leaders killed; <i>mosaic</i> doctrine adopted; outcome uncertain

The ‘airpower paradox’ also suggests that while bombs can destroy the physical manifestations of a regime, they cannot dictate the political successor or secure the transition¹⁰. Three distinct categories of ground intervention can be undertaken, each with a specific mission set and risk profile.

¹⁰. Robert Farley, “[Problem with the Iran War of 2026: America Doesn't Know What It Wants](#)”, - 1945, 28 February 2026.

- **Category 1: Special Forces Led**¹¹ (Limited Boots on Ground): This model emphasises "surgical" intervention by Special Forces.
 - **Missions:** Seizure of nuclear materials, decapitation of key leaders, extraction of defecting officials, destruction of key C2 nodes, and missile storage facilities.
 - **Advantages:** Lower risk /domestic political cost in the U.S; high mobility in difficult terrain- high chances of success
 - **Risks:** Increased probability of being isolated & captured.
- **Category 2: Full-Fledged Force**¹² (Infantry and Armour Operations)
 - **Mission:** Capture of Tehran and other major cities; securing of oil fields; and total disarmament of the IRGC.
 - **Advantages:** Only land force capable of exerting "control" over geophysical space; denotes complete politico-military victory
 - **Risks:** Conventional- high cost option, risk of a multi-decade "quagmire" and regional war expansion. Massive casualties; extensive logistical strain.
- **Category 3: Limited Offensive (Naval & Marine Forces Led)**
 - **Mission:** Capture of Kharg / other Island Territory; centrepiece for Iran’s oil industry, accounting for roughly 90 per cent of the country’s crude exports.
 - **Advantages:** Limited land forces, provides notion of victory; chokes key conduit of Iran’s revenue
 - **Risks:** Induction of ground forces, conduct of operations and their sustenance through the Strait of Hormuz is difficult and costly; degradation of oil infrastructure reduces leverage for the US and the asymmetric /missile threat to US forces rises.
- **Category 3a**
 - **Mission:** Capture of specific coastal areas to open the Strait of Hormuz
 - **Advantages:** A major victory marker for the US; reduction of Iran’s influence; resumption of oil traffic & enables global support for easing the strain on oil flow; successful result significantly outweighs risks.

¹¹. Doug Livermore, [“By fusing intelligence and special operations, Israel's strikes on Iran are a lesson in Strategic Surprise”](#), Atlantic Council, 14 June 2025.

¹². Robert E. Kelly, [“The Iran War of 2026: Why This Could Spiral into a Ground War”](#), 1945, 28 February 2026.

- **Risks:** Requirement of large force levels, limited resources within CENTCOM; pre-emptive sea mining by Iran; onshore forces prone to missile/rocket/drone attacks from mainland; hardened coastal defences difficult to reduce completely- enables asymmetric threat and continued resistance.

Irrespective of the category of operations being planned by the US/ Israel, the employment of ground forces in Iran will necessitate certain military conditions to be met for the effective execution of missions assigned to them. These five critical prerequisites must be satisfied to avoid any catastrophic failure in military operations:-

- **Total Suppression of Integrated Air Defences:** Ground forces cannot manoeuvre if exposed to Iranian drone swarms or mobile S-300/S-400 batteries. While the aerial strikes since Feb 28 have degraded these systems, the mobile ‘mosaic’ nature of Iranian defences requires persistent "wild weasel" missions¹³ to ensure a high probability of safe air corridors for troop sustenance and support.
- **Logistics and Basing Agreements:** The ‘Tyranny of Distance’ is a primary obstacle. U.S. forces are currently in an expeditionary posture with limited supply lines¹⁴. There is an inescapable requirement to secure the use of ports of GCC states (Kuwait, Qatar, UAE) and airfields for offensive ground operations¹⁵. In addition, the existing bases, as identified, must be expanded to handle the "sustainment tail" of the ground force and opened to Iranian targeting.
- **Destruction/ Degradation of the ‘Missile / Drone Capabilities’:** Iran's ability to target staging areas in Kuwait or Saudi Arabia with ballistic missiles needs to be zeroed out. This requires the destruction of hardened underground infrastructure¹⁶ before ground forces are inducted. Until these threats are neutralised, massing ground forces in the Gulf is an avoidable risk.
- **Domestic Political Consensus and Legal Mandate:** Transitioning to a ground war requires bipartisan approval, as well as support from the domestic population. According to the latest Mar 26 NPR/PBS news poll, only 36 per cent of Americans support Trump’s handling of the Iran conflict¹⁷.

¹³. Bruchmann and Air Marshal (Retd) Martin Sampson, [“US-Israel Campaign in Iran”](#), n. 6.

¹⁴. [“No Frontlines, No Limits: The Structural Impossibility of Containing a US-Iran War”](#), 21 February 2026.

¹⁵. [“Reading the Prospects of U.S.–Israeli Ground Intervention in Iran”](#), Progress Center for Policies, 30 March 2026.

¹⁶. Bruchmann and Air Marshal (Retd) Martin Sampson, [“US-Israel Campaign in Iran”](#), n. 6

¹⁷. Domenico Montanaro, [“Poll: A Majority of Americans Opposes U.S. Military Action in Iran”](#), NPR, 6 March 2026.

- **Lay Down Interim Governance Framework¹⁸ (In case of Full Scale Ground Offensive):** The lesson of OIF is that "winning the war and losing the peace" is a strategic defeat. In the event of a major offensive by ground forces, a clear roadmap must exist; otherwise, we are likely to see a repeat of the mistakes of the 2003 Iraq War.

The Need for Ground Forces in Iran?

The successful end to the US/Israeli campaign in Iran cannot be achieved through ‘punching holes in the sky’¹⁹ or killing individual leaders. The analysis of the given politico–military objectives can provide insight into the likely outcome in the current phase of the ongoing Non-Contact campaign²⁰.

Deny Ability to Develop/Acquire Nuclear Weapon

Iran is engaged in nuclear-related activities in approximately a dozen known locations across the country, with enrichment facilities concentrated at Natanz and Isfahan. It has also been carrying out nuclear activities at three previously unknown bases at Lavisan-Shian, Turqzabad, and Varamin²¹. The aerial campaign in Jun 2025 and in the ongoing conflict has led to heavy degradation of enrichment facilities at Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan nuclear complex. Despite a likely setback to the Iranian nuclear program, the fate of 440 kg of highly enriched uranium remains unconfirmed. It will continue to provide Iran with a latent capability for the future. Many of these nuclear facilities are spread over large distances. They are located deep underground to prevent US/Israeli bunker-busting bombs or missiles delivered by aerial means from causing permanent and complete damage to the arsenal. The air strikes remain the most instrumental element in generating strategic effects. They may not always result in tangible outcomes and are therefore less likely to achieve the objective of ‘removal of nuclear threat’ on their own.

To ensure permanent damage to at least some of the critical Iranian nuclear capabilities and secure the missing enriched uranium, the US/Israel will be required to carry out special operations (place some boots on the ground) on Iranian soil. A series of joint and coordinated Israeli/US special operations supported by air, intelligence and cyber/EW capabilities at selected high-value locations can assure destruction of critical resources such as centrifuges, elimination of key scientists and

18. [“Iran After Khamenei: A Strategic Assessment”](#), Middle East Forum, 16 March 2026.

19. Rachel Bronson, [“The Strategic Challenges of the US Military Campaign Against Iran”](#), The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 1 March 2026.

20. Andrew Miller, [“Trump Is Potentially Leading the United States Into an Unnecessary War With Iran”](#), Center for American Progress.

21. Mariel Ferragamo, Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, [“What Are Iran’s Nuclear and Missile Capabilities?”](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 4 March 2026.

also enable aerial targeting of hidden assets and facilities. The execution of special operations is highly complex, but recent success in Venezuela only strengthens the case, albeit the risk in Iran is multifold higher. Despite such high risk, three weeks of Operation Epic Fury have enabled a high degree of air control with US/Israeli forces to undertake covert induction of SF with defined and specific military objectives. A small footprint on Iranian soil may help the US/Israel achieve a tangible victory marker, and the off-ramp the US may be looking for.

Weakening the Regime & Severing the Proxies

The air strikes to target leadership and destroy military infrastructure will definitely reduce the effectiveness of the current regime; the mosaic model adopted by Iranian forces may mitigate its effect. The recent elevation of Mojtaba Khamenei as Supreme Leader reflects the resilience of the Iranian government apparatus, and any meaningful change in the regime or the establishment of permanent severance with militant proxies will require the dismantling of the entire clerical, military, and administrative structures, thereby necessitating a land component to oversee the change.

Unconditional Surrender

Although articulated later by the US president, an unconditional surrender by Iran is highly unlikely, as it considers itself one of the oldest civilisations, proclaiming to have weathered past attempts to erase its existence successfully for centuries. The US/ Israeli attack is also seen through the same lens and therefore seen as a period of temporary *discomfort* to be endured, as has been done in the past. This ‘thought’ forms a strong National will, and even a large-scale destruction of key strategic capabilities & infrastructure through a prolonged aerial campaign is unlikely to force the Iranian Government to seek a dialogue.

However, it will entail a prohibitively high cost for the US to sustain such an exhaustive aerial campaign as its current stockpile diminishes, at least in the short term, creating a strategic imbalance in the Indo-Pacific against China. The prospect of aerial strikes alone to cause an intolerable damage forcing Iran to the table remains a concern while its resilience to sustain losses both human & material remains quite high, as the war has only helped consolidate internal strife towards the external players.

Iran, unlike Venezuela, is a large country with a population of more than 90 million and a strong national will, key considerations before setting unconditional surrender as a politico-military objective. It will entail obtaining control over key cities across the country, the destruction of at least 60 per cent -70 per cent of its military capabilities, the capture/elimination of the top layers of leadership, and, most importantly, breaking the will of the people. To achieve all of these will require a

large-scale offensive, which even the US military, with all its resources, may find it difficult to muster, and remains a no-go from the start, besides the surety of a long, drawn-out, endless quagmire, similar to Russia in Ukraine, even after four years of conflict, and with a remote possibility of achieving the objective.

The damaging effect on the global economy, growing angst, and eroding support of other countries, including allies, for the conflict limit US/Israel options. At the same time, Iran continues to retain the freedom to cause pain for the US and its allies in the region.

Operation Epic Fury has achieved initial operational success in its opening hours, but it remains a "strategic long shot" if it relies solely on air power. Transitioning from a 'major Kinetic-Non Contact operation' to a successful political outcome will require greater resources and commitment for the ground component, along with addressing the challenges of its employment, as discussed previously. Failure to employ any ground component (large or small) may deny any meaningful victory marker. It will almost certainly result in a post-war Iran that is more radicalised, more anti-US/Israel, and more determined than ever to achieve a nuclear deterrent. The progress of ongoing operations after four weeks is gradually shifting towards a stalemate, with little inclination on the part of the US to put boots on the ground, consistent with its past experience. Israel, by contrast, may be more tempted only if it can establish a bona fide *raison d'être* and convince the US to do the hard work on its behalf.

Conclusion

Modern technologies of PGMs, long-range rockets, BVR missiles, and drones provide an unusually seductive form of military strength and seem like the perfect middle ground between a large ground-force invasion and total inaction, thereby offering gratification without commitment²². A deliberate analysis of current conflicts and historical precedents leads to a singular logical conclusion: that a wide range of capabilities must be sustained to dominate the battlefield, and no one can be considered a replacement for another. While airpower remains the key instrument for degradation/destruction, successful operations by ground troops act as a tangible victory marker for the Nation.

²². Daniel L. Byman, [“The Limits of Air Strikes when Fighting the Islamic State”](#), Brookings, 6 December 2016.

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