

THE IRAN CONFLICT 2025–2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The full paper in one page · for the reader who needs the key points before reading the analysis · 10 pages of substance distilled to four moves

The Bottom Line: Operation Epic Fury (Feb–May 2026) empirically validated the diagnostic written for Operation Midnight Hammer (June 2025): the same kinetic action against the same architecture produced the same outcome — tactical degradation, strategic recurrence — eight months later. A lasting solution requires architectural work the dominant frame has refused. The April 2026 negotiating window is the moment when this is most legible to actors previously protected from seeing it.

THE DIAGNOSTIC

The Dominant Frame

"Stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons." Tactically coherent. Strategically incomplete. Pre-commits the policy instrument to prevention through interdiction. Forecloses the questions whose answers actually determine long-term outcomes.

The Four Category Errors

- 1 Capability mistaken for thing.** Iran's nuclear program is a capability (knowledge, manufacturing capacity, political determination), not a destructible object. Centrifuges can be rebuilt; knowledge cannot be unlearned.
- 2 Architecture mistaken for component.** Strikes engage component instances (sites, centrifuges, leaders); they do not engage the regional security architecture that produces Iranian strategic calculations in the first place.
- 3 Sustained engagement mistaken for discrete event.** Iran's nuclear program has been "set back" by sabotage, assassinations, and now two rounds of strikes across roughly 15 years. Each setback was followed by reconstitution. The frame "discrete event that solves the problem" conflicts with the empirical pattern.
- 4 Multi-layer bundle mistaken for single frame.** "Stop Iran" bundles nuclear capability (architecture), regional proxy activity (interfaces), missile production (components), and ideological hostility (architecture) — concerns at different layers that trade off against each other.

Empirical Confirmation (Epic Fury, 2026)

- **8 months** from Midnight Hammer's conclusion to Epic Fury's launch
- **77%** of visible tunnel entrances struck — sites restored within hours via pre-positioned equipment
- U.S. intelligence acknowledged **≥50% damage overestimation**
- Iranian air force operational tempo to zero; navy obliterated — yet the architecture (Iranian determination, CRINK alignment) hardened, not weakened
- Supreme Leader Khamenei killed; succession unfolding under wartime conditions

THE SOLUTION

The Refined Reframe

REFINED REFRAME (POST-EPIC FURY)

"What regional security architecture would make Iranian nuclear restraint compatible with regime survival under post-Khamenei succession leadership, while centering Gulf states as co-architects, navigating CRINK as a structural constraint, accepting the empirical kinetic ceiling as the strategic premise, and using the narrow April 2026 negotiating window before it closes?"

The Five-Phase Sequence

- 1 Phase 1 (0–12 months) — Use the April 2026 Window.** IAEA inspector return; Strait of Hormuz reopening verified; deconfliction lines; mil-to-mil hotlines restored.
- 2 Phase 2 (12–24 months) — Establish the Regional Forum.** Iran + 6 GCC states + Iraq + Jordan + U.S. + EU at the table; China/Russia briefed but not parties; first binding deconfliction agreement.
- 3 Phase 3 (24–36 months) — Strategic Calculation Modification.** Hardest phase. Regime-security signals exchanged for verifiable enrichment suspension; sanctions architecture adjusted in graduated tranches.
- 4 Phase 4 (36–60 months) — Formal Architecture.** Multi-party regional security treaty; continuous-monitoring verification at underground sites; CRINK accommodation in side agreements.
- 5 Phase 5 (60–120 months) — Self-Stabilization.** Architecture absorbs underlying tensions at lower cost than the strike-recurrence cycle. The recurrence pattern is broken.

The Choice

Both paths are expensive. The dominant frame's expense is recurring and unbounded — Epic Fury demonstrated that strikes do not terminate the problem. The reframed solution's expense has a chance of terminal value.

FINAL VERDICT

Operation Epic Fury did not refute the analysis written for Operation Midnight Hammer. It validated it. The next operation will be required within months to years; it too will not produce terminal value. The recurrence pattern is now a public fact, not an analytical prediction.

Read Sections 1–4 for the substantiation.

THE IRAN CONFLICT

2025–2026

A STRUCTURED REFRAMING ANALYSIS

Applying the five-pattern method to the 2025 strikes (Operation Midnight Hammer) and the 2026 escalation (Operation Epic Fury) — and to the lasting solution the recurring engagement has not produced

Central Argument: *The 2025 strikes (Operation Midnight Hammer) and the 2026 strikes (Operation Epic Fury, the largest Middle East air campaign in a generation) form a single recurrence pattern that empirically validates the diagnostic: a strategic frame that systematically refuses to do the architectural work will require the same kinetic intervention against the same underlying capability indefinitely. Within eight months of "Operation Midnight Hammer" concluding, an even larger operation was required against the same target set. This paper applies the Structured Reframing method to both rounds, demonstrates how Epic Fury validated the predictions made for Midnight Hammer, and refines the proposed architectural solution for the post-Khamenei, post-CRINK-hardening reality.*

SCOPE AND DISCLOSURE

This paper is a methodological exercise, not a policy prescription. The Structured Reframing method is content-neutral; it surfaces category errors and layer-mistakes in problem framing regardless of whether the underlying domain is government program management, corporate strategy, or geopolitics. The Iran case is used here because it exhibits, with unusual clarity, the cluster of errors the method is designed to catch: a tactical instrument deployed at the component layer against a problem that lives at the architecture layer.

The author holds no policy position on whether the strikes should have been conducted. The argument is narrower: the framing within which the decision was made is incomplete in ways that the method names precisely, and a realistic alternative can be constructed from the same method.

WHAT HAPPENED — FACTUAL BASELINE

On 13 June 2025, Israel launched *Operation Rising Lion*, a coordinated strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, military command, and senior leadership. Approximately 200 Israeli fighter jets hit more than 100 targets, killing the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Hossein Salami), the armed forces chief of staff (Mohammed Bagheri), the IRGC air force commander (Amir Ali Hajizadeh), and multiple nuclear scientists. Iran responded with missile and drone attacks on Israel; most were intercepted.

On 22 June 2025, the United States joined the operation under the codename *Operation Midnight Hammer*, striking the Fordow Uranium Enrichment Plant, the Natanz Nuclear Facility, and the Isfahan facility. Iran retaliated with a missile strike on Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar; no American casualties were reported. A ceasefire was announced on 24 June 2025.

Damage assessments diverge. A preliminary low-confidence U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report estimated a setback of "a matter of months." The CIA director subsequently characterized the damage as "severely damaged," requiring years to rebuild. The IAEA Director-General stated that "no one is in a position to have fully assessed the underground damage at Fordow." The Arms Control Association's 2026 retrospective noted that Iran's "nuclear knowledge, its stockpile of 400 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60-percent uranium-235, its centrifuge manufacturing capacity, its third underground enrichment site, and its determination to keep the nuclear program going remain."

READER'S GUIDE

This paper is in four sections.

- Section 1 — The Reframing Analysis (2025).** Applies the five-pattern diagnostic to the dominant frame at the time of Operation Midnight Hammer and surfaces four category errors.
- Section 2 — A Realistic Alternative (2025 baseline).** Builds out the architecture, components, interfaces, authority gates, and vocabulary of an alternative approach using the full scaffold.
- Section 3 — Epic Fury: The Predicted Recurrence Empirically Validated.** Documents the 38-day 2026 operation and shows how each of the four category errors named in Section 1 is now empirically demonstrated.
- Section 4 — A Lasting Solution.** Refines the Section 2 reframe for the post-Khamenei reality, the deepened CRINK alignment, the Gulf states' newly direct exposure, and the demonstrated kinetic ceiling.

METHODOLOGICAL HONESTY

Section 2 proposes specific architectural choices. The author acknowledges these choices are politically constrained today in ways that may render them infeasible in any single administration. The point is not that the alternative is easy. The point is that the method requires the alternative to be named honestly, so the trade-offs of the chosen action are visible. Choosing the strike option without naming the alternative is the category error.

HOW THE METHOD APPLIES HERE

The Structured Reframing method's five patterns (Reframe-First, Frame-the-System, Place-the-Parts, Authority-Where-Accountability-Lives, Naming-as-Anchoring) and four-step diagnostic (Spot, Name, Replace, Rebuild) operate domain-neutrally. The patterns are not specific to government program management or corporate strategy; they are operations on epistemic structure. Geopolitical problems are particularly susceptible to the errors the patterns catch because the stakes pressure decision-makers toward simplified framings, and because the political audience rewards single-frame narratives.

For practitioners of the method who have not previously applied it to geopolitical problems, the Iran case is instructive precisely because the same diagnostic that catches DOGE's misframing (Case Study 6 of the Master Handbook), Boeing's misframing (Case Study 7), and Brexit's misframing (Case Study 8) catches the strikes' misframing — and points toward the same kind of solution: building architecture, not striking components.

The Dominant Frame and Its Category Errors

What the operating frame says · what it pre-commits to · what it cannot see

THE DOMINANT FRAME

"Stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons."

This is the operating frame — the one in the press releases, the legislative debates, the diplomatic communiqués, and the operational planning documents that produced the strikes. It is grammatically simple. It feels morally clear. It produces a discrete success metric (Iran does not have nuclear weapons). It pre-commits the policy instrument to "prevention through interdiction". Within that frame, "Operation Midnight Hammer" was a coherent execution: identify the physical components of the program, target them, degrade them.

The frame is not wrong in some absolute sense. Iran acquiring deliverable nuclear weapons would be a materially worse outcome than Iran not acquiring them. The question the method forces is whether the "frame" — the conceptual structure within which decisions are made — captures the actual problem it claims to address.

THE CATEGORY ERRORS

The diagnostic surfaces four stacked category errors inside the dominant frame.

Error 1 — Treating a capability as a thing

The frame treats "Iran's nuclear program" as a "thing" — centrifuges, facilities, scientists, stockpiles — that can be destroyed or substantially set back through kinetic action. The program is not a thing. It is a "capability": a combination of knowledge, manufacturing capacity, organizational learning, regional supplier networks, and political determination. The physical components are the most visible manifestation of the capability but not its substance. Nuclear knowledge, once acquired, cannot be unlearned. Centrifuge manufacturing capacity, once established, can be reconstituted. Political determination, once mobilized by external attack, typically increases rather than diminishes.

This is the same error Boeing made (Case Study 7): treating a recurring symptom (specific aircraft defects) as if it were the problem, rather than as the visible output of the architecture that keeps producing it. The frame "fix MCAS" cannot solve "Boeing's safety culture." The frame "destroy the centrifuges" cannot solve "Iran's strategic determination to maintain nuclear hedging capability."

Error 2 — Treating an architecture problem as a component problem

Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability is not an isolated decision; it is the "output" of a regional security architecture in which Iran perceives itself as an existential target. The relevant observed pattern, from Tehran's perspective, runs: Iraq under Saddam had no WMD and was invaded; Libya under Qaddafi gave up WMD and was overthrown; North Korea kept and developed WMD and its regime remains intact. Whether or not Western analysts find this perception legitimate, it is the perception inside which Iranian strategic planning occurs. Strikes against the components of the program (Fordow, Natanz, Isfahan) do not engage the architecture (the regional security order that produces Iranian strategic calculations); they engage component instances within it.

Error 3 — Treating a sustained engagement as a discrete event

The naming of the operation — *Operation Midnight Hammer* — anchors it as a culmination, a definitive moment, a hammer-blow. The vocabulary is climactic. But the problem being addressed is not climactic; it is multi-decadal. Iran's nuclear program has been "set back" by sabotage (Stuxnet, the 2010s), assassinations (Mohsen Fakhrazadeh in 2020, multiple scientists in 2025), and now strikes. Each setback was characterized at the time as significant. Each was followed by reconstitution. The frame "discrete event that solves the problem" conflicts directly with the empirical pattern of "recurring engagement that delays a determined adversary."

This is structurally identical to DOGE's misframing (Case Study 6): treating a steady-state systems-design problem with a time-limited mandate-based intervention. The mandate ends; the underlying system regenerates the problem. The method's diagnostic for this pattern is precise: *if the same intervention has been required multiple times against the same underlying capability over multiple decades, the intervention is not the solution — it is a recurring purchase of time during which the actual solution is not being built.*

Error 4 — Bundling separable concerns under one rhetorical frame

"Stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons" bundles concerns that operate at different layers:

BUNDLED CONCERN	ACTUAL LAYER
Nuclear weapons proliferation in a hostile state	Architecture (regional security)
Iranian regime hostility to U.S. and Israel	Architecture (political settlement)
Specific enrichment activity above weapons threshold	Components (centrifuges, sites)
Iran's regional proxy network (Hezbollah, Houthis, militias)	Interfaces (proxy command-control)
Iranian missile and drone capability	Components (delivery systems)

This is the Brexit pattern (Case Study 8): a frame that mobilizes a coalition by bundling distinct concerns becomes structurally incapable of guiding implementation, because the bundled layers trade off against each other. Destroying centrifuges (component layer) does not change regional security architecture. Engaging with regional security architecture may require accepting some Iranian proxy influence (interface layer). Working on the political settlement may require concessions that look like rewarding hostility. A frame that bundles all of these as one thing ("stop Iran") cannot guide selection among them.

DIAGNOSTIC SUMMARY

Four stacked category errors: capability mistaken for thing, architecture mistaken for component, sustained engagement mistaken for discrete event, multi-layer bundle mistaken for single frame. Each is a

Authority, Naming, and What the Frame Foreclosed

Pattern 4 and Pattern 5 applied · the parts of the problem the frame structurally cannot engage

AUTHORITY-ACCOUNTABILITY GAPS

The Structured Reframing method (Pattern 4) requires that decision authority be co-located with accountability for outcomes. In the Iran case, the gap is severe and structural.

Decision authority for the strikes sat in Washington and Tel Aviv. Both governments held the legal, political, and operational authority to order kinetic action against Iranian facilities.

Accountability for downstream consequences is distributed across actors who had no input into the decision:

- The Gulf states (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait) — whose territory was used in Iran's retaliation and whose oil infrastructure is exposed to any subsequent escalation
- The IAEA — whose monitoring regime depends on Iranian cooperation that strikes typically degrade
- The post-2026 U.S. administration — whoever inherits the regional environment that the strikes shaped
- Non-proliferation norms globally — including the precedent set for other states' security calculations (notably U.S. allies considering their own nuclear options)
- The Iranian population — whose post-strike political environment may be more or less amenable to long-term resolution depending on how the strikes are processed domestically

This is the precise pattern Pattern 4 names as a brittleness signature: when authority is upstream and accountability is downstream and distributed, the system that produced the decision is structurally unable to absorb feedback from the consequences. The strike decision-makers will not be the ones managing the consequences; the consequence-managers had no role in the decision. The diagnostic prediction: the configuration will repeat — escalation, kinetic action, accommodation, recurrence — because the authority loop has no closure.

NAMING-AS-ANCHORING — THE TRAP

Pattern 5 of the method observes that vocabulary determines what gets seen, debated, and acted on. Three naming choices structure the Iran problem in ways that foreclose certain solutions before they can be considered.

"Operation Midnight Hammer"

The codename anchors the operation as a hammer-blow — a discrete climactic moment of force. The vocabulary is borrowed from criminal-justice metaphors (a hammer falls). It pre-commits its users to defending the operation as a **solution** rather than as a **move in a sustained engagement**. When the operation does not produce the intended end-state, its defenders face a binary: either it was a failure (politically unacceptable) or it succeeded (factually contestable). The naming closed off the third option that is empirically most accurate: it was an effective tactical action that bought time, within a strategic frame that did not use the time it bought.

"Iran's nuclear program"

The phrase reifies a capability as if it were an object — a single program with a single status. The framing makes "the program" the unit of analysis. But Iran's strategic posture toward nuclear weapons is not a program; it is a **posture** — a set of decisions about hedging, ambiguity, threshold capability, and break-out timing. A posture can be modified by changes to the calculations that produced it. A program can only be destroyed. The naming pre-commits the policy instrument to destruction rather than to calculation-modification.

"The Iran threat"

The phrase fuses three distinct concerns under one name: nuclear capability, regional proxy activity, and ideological-political hostility. Each is a different problem with different instruments. Naming them as one thing ("Iran") makes them analytically inseparable in the political conversation, even though they are practically separable in policy design. This is the Brexit naming trap in geopolitics: an emotionally coherent bundle that is analytically incoherent and operationally unbuildable.

WHAT THE DOMINANT FRAME STRUCTURALLY CANNOT ENGAGE

The frame "stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons" forecloses several questions that the diagnostic suggests are determinative.

- 1 What would change Iran's strategic calculation about needing nuclear hedging?** The frame cannot ask this because it pre-commits to prevention rather than to calculation-modification.
- 2 What regional security architecture would make Iranian nuclear restraint compatible with regime survival?** The frame cannot ask this because architecture-building falls outside its time horizon and policy vocabulary.
- 3 What would a verifiable, durable, multi-administration agreement structure look like?** The frame cannot ask this because the JCPOA precedent — and its political vulnerability — established that single-administration agreements are reversible and therefore not credible.
- 4 What internal Iranian political dynamics would support or oppose a long-term arrangement?** The frame cannot ask this because it treats Iran as a unitary actor rather than as a state with hardline and pragmatic factions whose relative power is responsive to U.S. and regional choices.

THE METHOD'S VERDICT — SECTION 1

The Iran strikes are intelligible within the frame "stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons." That frame contains four stacked category errors, structural authority-accountability gaps, and naming traps that foreclose the questions whose answers would actually determine long-term outcomes. The action was probably correct given the frame. The frame is incomplete in ways the method can name precisely. Section 2 attempts the rebuild.

The Reframe, the Architecture, the Bounded Roles

Building what the dominant frame foreclosed · what would have to be true · what costs would be honest

THE REPLACEMENT FRAME

"What regional security architecture would make Iranian nuclear restraint compatible with regime survival, while remaining verifiable and durable across U.S. political cycles?"

This is the reframe the method produces. It contains seven explicit moves, each of which reverses a specific category error from Section 1.

REPLACEMENT MOVE	REVERSES
"Regional security architecture"	Architecture treated as component (Error 2)
"Compatible with regime survival"	Capability treated as thing (Error 1)
"Verifiable"	Discrete event treated as solution (Error 3)
"Durable across political cycles"	Sustained engagement bundled with single-administration deal
"Iranian nuclear restraint"	Bundling separable concerns (Error 4)

The reframe is honest about what it requires. It does not deliver a slogan. It does not pre-commit to a single instrument. It opens the design space the dominant frame had foreclosed.

THE TRADITIONAL VS. REFRAMED COMPARISON

TRADITIONAL FRAMING	REFRAMED
Iran is the target	Regional architecture is the subject
Stop the program	Modify the calculation
Decisive action	Sustained engagement
Single-administration deal	Multi-party architecture
Iran as unitary adversary	Iran as state with internal factions
Nuclear weapons as binary	Nuclear posture as spectrum

THE SYSTEM STRUCTURE

The method (Pattern 2) requires that any reframe be followed by a designed system structure — named layers, each with a bounded role, each with explicit interfaces between them. The reframed problem decomposes into five layers.

- 1 **Regional Security Architecture (foundational layer).** A multi-party framework — minimally Iran, the U.S., the Gulf states, Israel as participant-or-observer, the IAEA as monitor — that defines acceptable behavior, escalation thresholds, and dispute mechanisms.
- 2 **Strategic Calculation Modification (architecture-to-component bridge).** The specific instruments that change Iran's perception of nuclear hedging as essential — including regime-security signals, regional integration pathways, and credible alternative deterrents.
- 3 **Verification Regime (component layer).** The technical inspection, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms — IAEA-led but reinforced by national technical means and possibly novel transparency instruments.
- 4 **Sequenced Implementation (interface layer).** The order in which obligations attach, with explicit reversibility windows, review points, and proportional response mechanisms when violations occur.
- 5 **Multi-Cycle Durability (governance layer).** The political architecture — congressional involvement, multi-party guarantees, treaty rather than executive-agreement status where possible — that makes the framework robust to changes in any single administration.

WHY FIVE LAYERS, NOT ONE

The JCPOA of 2015 was, in this typology, primarily a layer-3 instrument (verification regime) with weak layer-4 sequencing and effectively no layer-1 or layer-5. It was therefore politically vulnerable — and was duly abandoned in 2018. A frame that produces only the verification regime cannot survive political cycles. A frame that produces the architecture, calculation modification, verification, sequencing, AND multi-cycle durability "can". The method's diagnostic for "why did the JCPOA fail?" is not "Iran was untrustworthy" — it is "the agreement was incomplete at the architecture layer."

Bounded Roles, Authority Gates, and the Hard Trade-Offs

Placing the parts · locating authority · naming the politically inconvenient honestly

COMPONENT PLACEMENT (PATTERN 3)

Each layer above requires specific parties bounded to specific roles. The method requires both naming what each is bounded to and what would be wrong to delegate to them.

PARTY	BOUNDED TO	WRONG TO DELEGATE
United States	Hegemonic stability provision; sanctions architecture; ultimate security guarantor	Defining regional security terms unilaterally
Iran	Nuclear posture decisions; regional proxy modulation; verification cooperation	Defining the architecture under which it participates
Israel	Direct security veto on imminent threats; participant in regional framework	Unilateral architecture-design authority
Gulf states	Regional ownership; economic integration pathways; verification reinforcement	Hosting the kinetic component alone
IAEA	Technical verification; independent assessment; norm preservation	Political adjudication; enforcement
EU / UK	Diplomatic continuity; JCPOA lessons; multi-cycle ballast	Primary security guarantee
China & Russia	Architecture acknowledgment; non-spoiler role	Co-architect role (their strategic interests conflict)

The component-placement work above is what does not happen when the dominant frame is "stop Iran." Under the dominant frame, the question is binary: Iran in or out, comply or get struck. Under the reframed system structure, the question is configuration: which parties, in which roles, with which constraints, with which interfaces.

AUTHORITY GATES (PATTERN 4)

The reframed structure has explicit authority gates that the dominant frame did not have.

- 1 Architecture-Design Gate.** Multi-party negotiation; consensus-required on framework terms; no single party (including U.S.) can unilaterally redefine the architecture.
- 2 Verification Adjudication Gate.** IAEA holds technical authority; political authority for response sits with the architecture's governing body, not with any single party.
- 3 Reversibility Gate.** Sequenced obligations attach with explicit review points (24/36/60 months); each side can withdraw with notice but loses the corresponding benefit.

- 4 Escalation Gate.** Proportional response mechanisms triggered by specific verifiable thresholds — not by individual administrations' political judgments about Iranian intent.

THE HARD TRADE-OFFS — NAMED HONESTLY

The method requires that the costs of the reframed solution be named explicitly. Otherwise the comparison to the dominant frame is rigged. Three trade-offs are politically inconvenient and analytically unavoidable.

TRADE-OFF 1 — REGIME SECURITY SIGNALS

Modifying Iran's strategic calculation requires reducing its perception that nuclear hedging is essential to regime survival. The instruments that do this — non-aggression assurances, regional integration pathways, removal of regime-change rhetoric from official discourse — are politically toxic in the United States today. The reframe requires acknowledging that some form of regime-security signal is part of the price of durable nuclear restraint. The current administration cannot pay this price; the question is whether any administration can, and what the cost is of continuing to refuse.

TRADE-OFF 2 — REGIONAL INTEGRATION WITH ADVERSARIES

Iran is a regional actor; durable architecture requires its regional integration in some form, which means living with some level of Iranian regional influence (including the proxy interfaces — Hezbollah, the Houthi-aligned actors, the Iraqi militias). The reframe does not require accepting Iranian dominance of any specific theater, but it does require accepting that Iranian regional presence is a fact to be managed rather than a problem to be eliminated. The alternative — sustained military pressure across all theaters indefinitely — is what is happening now and is what the recurrence pattern demonstrates does not produce stable outcomes.

TRADE-OFF 3 — MULTI-CYCLE DURABILITY REQUIRES MULTI-PARTY GUARANTEES

Single-administration agreements are reversible and therefore not credible. Multi-cycle durability requires either treaty status (constitutionally requires Senate ratification, politically extraordinarily difficult), multi-party guarantees (constrains U.S. unilateralism in ways that domestic politics resists), or congressional involvement (depoliticizes the agreement but requires bipartisan buy-in that is currently absent). There is no path to durability that does not require the U.S. to constrain its own future flexibility. That constraint is the price of credibility.

Vocabulary, Uptake, and the Method's Verdict

Naming the architecture · who would have to carry it · why this is hard to sell and harder to refuse

LOAD-BEARING VOCABULARY (PATTERN 5)

The reframed solution requires vocabulary that does conceptual work — that anchors each move to an established tradition and prevents collapse back into the dominant frame's bundled rhetoric.

LOAD-BEARING TERM	ANCHORED TO
Regional Security Architecture	Helsinki Final Act (1975); CSCE/OSCE framework; arms control tradition of multi-party security frameworks
Strategic Calculation Modification	Deterrence theory (Schelling); rational-actor strategic studies; the empirical observation that nuclear-restraint cases (Brazil, Argentina, South Africa) involved regime-security shifts, not military pressure
Sequenced Implementation	Diplomatic theory of confidence-building measures (CBMs); INF Treaty implementation history; trust-but-verify lineage
Multi-Cycle Durability	Constitutional treaty doctrine; political science of credible commitments (North & Weingast 1989); the empirical record of which arms-control agreements survived political turnover
Nuclear Posture (vs. program)	Nuclear-strategy literature (Sagan, Narang); the analytical distinction between weaponization, threshold capability, and ambiguity strategies

Each term displaces a piece of the dominant frame's vocabulary with one that creates the distinction the dominant frame could not. "Architecture" instead of "deal." "Calculation modification" instead of "stop." "Posture" instead of "program." "Multi-cycle durability" instead of "agreement."

UPTAKE — WHO WOULD HAVE TO CARRY THIS

Pattern 4 of the method (Authority-Where-Accountability-Lives) requires naming who would have to own the reframed solution. The honest answer is: no single party in the current political configuration has both the authority and the incentive to do so. This is a finding, not a refutation.

- 1 Inside the U.S.** — Would require bipartisan executive-legislative cooperation on the multi-cycle durability layer. Currently absent. A serious effort would require either (a) a moment of bipartisan urgency triggered by a future escalation, or (b) a congressional faction willing to bear the political cost of constraining future administrations.
- 2 Inside Iran** — Would require pragmatist-faction ascendancy with hardliner acquiescence. The 2025 strikes weakened hardliners' "we told you so" position only briefly; the rebuilding period typically strengthens hardliner narratives. The pragmatist moment requires the U.S. to provide an off-ramp that does not look like capitulation domestically.

3 In the region — Would require Gulf-state participation that they have not historically wanted to provide for Iranian-engagement frameworks. Saudi normalization with Israel (Abraham Accords expansion) provides an unexpected vector: a Saudi-Israeli-U.S. axis that brings Iran in as a *fourth* participant under conditions, rather than treating Iran as the external target.

4 In Israel — Would require political leadership willing to accept that Iran's nuclear posture is a regional architecture problem, not a unilateral Israeli existential problem. Current Israeli political consensus does not support this; future leadership might, particularly if the strike-and-recur pattern continues to demonstrably fail.

THE METHOD'S FINAL VERDICT

Applying the full Structured Reframing diagnostic to the Iran case yields a precise finding:

FINDING

The strikes were a tactically coherent move within a strategically incomplete frame. The frame's incompleteness is not accidental and not the fault of the decision-makers in any specific administration. It is the consequence of treating a multi-decadal, multi-party, architecture-level problem with the policy instruments built for short-cycle, single-party, component-level interventions. The current configuration will continue to produce the same outcome — strike, reconstitute, strike, reconstitute — until the architecture-level work is attempted.

The reframed solution outlined in Section 2 is not easy. It requires the United States to accept constraints on its own future flexibility, to provide regime-security signals to a regime it considers hostile, and to share architecture-design authority with parties (Iran, Russia, China) it does not trust. These are real costs. The dominant frame's defenders are correct that the reframed solution is politically expensive.

The reframed solution's defenders are correct on a different point: the dominant frame's solution is also expensive — in repeated strikes, in regional instability, in proliferation-norm erosion, in the strategic distraction of cyclical Iran crises across multiple decades, and in the unbuilt regional architecture whose absence allows every other Middle East problem to compound. The choice is not between an expensive solution and a free one. It is between an expensive solution with terminal value and an expensive recurring expenditure with no terminal value.

THE OPERATING CLAIM

Structured Reframing does not produce easy answers in geopolitics. It produces honest comparisons. The honest comparison here is that the dominant frame has produced four decades of recurring Iran crises and is on track to produce more. The reframed alternative requires expensive architectural work that may also fail. But unlike the dominant frame, the reframed alternative has a chance of *terminating* the recurrence. The method's verdict is that this chance — even discounted by its political difficulty — exceeds the expected value of continuing the current pattern. *That* is what the diagnostic adds to the policy debate.

— Avansys Lab, May 2026. This analysis is methodological, not partisan. It applies the Structured Reframing method to a public-discourse case without endorsing any specific policy outcome. Practitioners are encouraged to test the diagnostic against their own

The 38-Day Operation and What It Proved

Operation Epic Fury · 28 February – 5 May 2026 · empirical confirmation of the diagnostic written for Midnight Hammer

FACTUAL BASELINE — OPERATION EPIC FURY

On 28 February 2026, at approximately 1:15 AM EST (7:00 AM Iran local time), the United States commenced *Operation Epic Fury* jointly with Israel's *Operation Roaring Lion*. The operation began with an eight-minute video announcement on TruthSocial; there was no media address or full Congressional briefing beyond a Gang of Eight notification shortly before strikes commenced (CSIS, March 2026).

The opening salvo killed Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, along with the IRGC commander and Iran's defense minister. Iran responded almost immediately under *Operation True Promise IV*, launching hundreds of missiles and thousands of drones at targets across seven countries — Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq — including the US Fifth Fleet at Bahrain, Al-Udeid Airbase in Qatar, and Kuwait International Airport, which suspended commercial aviation entirely.

The 38-day operation employed B-1, B-2, and B-52 bombers, LUCAS drones, and Patriot and THAAD interceptor systems. Per the U.S. Department of War's first-10-days fact sheet, more than 5,000 targets were struck; the White House April 8 release cited "more than 2,000 strikes" producing "leadership losses, paralysis, and military desertions." Iranian air force operational tempo went from 30–100 flights per day to zero. Iran's navy lost 150 warships across 16 classes and all submarines; 97% of naval mines were eliminated.

A ceasefire was announced on 8 April 2026, with the White House statement noting Iran had agreed to "reopening the Strait of Hormuz as the Trump Administration negotiates a broader peace agreement." The operation formally concluded on 5 May 2026.

THE EMPIRICAL FINDING

The central empirical finding from Epic Fury — visible in independent analyses from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Soufan Centre — is that the operation achieved tactical damage at the component layer while failing to reach the architecture layer at which the strategic problem lives.

Epic Fury struck 77% of *visible* tunnel entrances. U.S. intelligence subsequently admitted the campaign had overestimated damage by at least 50%. Iranian military engineers, using pre-positioned excavation equipment that had been staged in anticipation of exactly this contingency, cleared bombed tunnel entrances and restored sites to full operation *within hours*, as confirmed by satellite imagery. The underground facilities featured redundant multiple exits, decoy entrances specifically designed to absorb strikes, and transporter-erector-launcher (TEL) systems engineered to emerge from tunnel exits, fire from pre-surveyed positions, and return underground. The Times of Israel reported U.S. intelligence assessment that Iran retained the capacity to recover underground launchers and fire thousands of missiles.

THE FOUR CATEGORY ERRORS — EMPIRICALLY VALIDATED

Section 1 of this paper named four category errors embedded in the dominant frame at the time of Midnight Hammer. Epic Fury provides empirical confirmation of each.

ERROR 1 — CAPABILITY MISTAKEN FOR THING (CONFIRMED)

Section 1 predicted: "Nuclear knowledge, once acquired, cannot be unlearned. Centrifuge manufacturing capacity, once established, can be reconstituted."

Epic Fury demonstrated: Within hours of strikes, Iranian engineers restored bombed tunnel entrances using *pre-positioned equipment*. The architecture for rapid reconstitution was already built — because the program is a capability, not a thing.

ERROR 2 — ARCHITECTURE MISTAKEN FOR COMPONENT (CONFIRMED)

Section 1 predicted: "Strikes against the components of the program do not engage the architecture; they engage component instances within it."

Epic Fury demonstrated: 5,000+ targets struck; Iranian air force operational tempo went to zero; navy obliterated. The components were defeated decisively. Yet the regional architecture (Iran's strategic determination, the CRINK alignment, regional security order) was unchanged. The strategic problem persisted across the kinetic resolution of the component problem.

ERROR 3 — SUSTAINED ENGAGEMENT MISTAKEN FOR DISCRETE EVENT (CONFIRMED)

Section 1 predicted: "If the same intervention has been required multiple times against the same underlying capability over multiple decades, the intervention is not the solution — it is a recurring purchase of time during which the actual solution is not being built."

Epic Fury demonstrated: Within *eight months* of Midnight Hammer's June 2025 conclusion, an operation an order of magnitude larger was required against the same target set. The recurrence interval is shortening. The same prediction applies to whatever follows Epic Fury.

ERROR 4 — MULTI-LAYER BUNDLE MISTAKEN FOR SINGLE FRAME (CONFIRMED)

Section 1 predicted: "A frame that bundles distinct concerns becomes structurally incapable of guiding implementation."

Epic Fury's stated objectives, per the State Department release: "destroy Iranian offensive missiles, destroy Iranian missile production, destroy Iran's navy and other security infrastructure," and ensure Iran "will never have nuclear weapons." Five distinct concerns, four operating at different layers, bundled under one operation. Some component objectives were achieved (navy destruction, missile production damage); the architecture-layer objective ("will never have nuclear weapons") was not — and cannot be — achieved by kinetic action.

New Evidence Epic Fury Reveals

What changed between June 2025 and May 2026 · the architecture-level consequences the strikes did produce

FIVE CONSEQUENTIAL SHIFTS

Epic Fury did not produce a strategic resolution at the architecture layer. It did, however, produce five architecture-level *consequences* that the diagnostic must now incorporate into any refined reframe. Each is a development the original Section 2 proposal could not have anticipated and must now accommodate.

1. Khamenei's Death — A Succession Without Precedent

Supreme Leader Khamenei, the architect of the post-1989 Iranian strategic posture, was killed in the opening hours of Epic Fury. The Islamic Republic has had only two Supreme Leaders in its history (Khomeini 1979–1989, Khamenei 1989–2026). Succession has no established procedure that has been tested under wartime conditions. The likely successor pool — Mojtaba Khamenei, Ebrahim Raisi-aligned hardliners, the Assembly of Experts' pragmatist faction — produces strategically different futures. A new leader establishing legitimacy in a post-strike environment will face structural pressure either to demonstrate strength (hardline path) or to position against a discredited predecessor's strategy (pragmatic path). Neither outcome is predictable from outside. The reframed solution must operate without knowing which path the succession will take, and must therefore be designed to function across both.

2. The CRINK Alignment Has Hardened

The China–Russia–Iran–North Korea alignment (sometimes called CRINK or the Axis of Upheaval) was a loose strategic coordination before Midnight Hammer; under the cumulative pressure of 2025–2026 strikes, it has hardened into something approaching an operational alliance. Each member has incentives to reinforce the others against U.S. kinetic pressure. Iran's post-Epic-Fury reconstitution will draw on Chinese economic backstop, Russian air defense knowledge transfer, and North Korean missile-and-nuclear-knowledge exchange. The architecture-layer consequence: any reframed solution must treat CRINK as a structural constraint to navigate, not a problem to dissolve. Pulling Iran out of CRINK is now extraordinarily difficult; designing regional architecture that functions with Iran partially embedded in CRINK is harder than the 2015 environment but more honest.

3. The Kinetic Ceiling Has Been Empirically Demonstrated

Epic Fury employed the most concentrated U.S. air power deployed in the region in decades: B-1, B-2, B-52 bombers; thousands of munitions; Patriot and THAAD interceptors operated at sustained tempo. The result: 77% of *visible* tunnel entrances struck, 50%+ damage overestimation acknowledged by U.S. intelligence, and Iranian sites restored to operation within hours. THAAD interceptor stockpiles were significantly depleted defending against True Promise IV retaliation. The kinetic instrument has a ceiling, and both sides now know where it is. Future Iranian strategic planning will assume that the U.S. cannot sustain another Epic Fury at higher intensity without significant resupply cycles. The implication: *kinetic deterrence threats have lost credibility marginally with every iteration*, and this is now a public fact, not an analytical one.

4. The Gulf States Have Direct Skin in the Game

True Promise IV extended Iranian retaliation across *seven Arab states*, including territories of all six Gulf Cooperation Council members and Iraq. Bahrain (U.S. Fifth Fleet host), Qatar (Al-Udeid), the UAE (Al-Dhafra), Saudi Arabia (oil infrastructure), and Kuwait (international airport, civilian aviation halted) absorbed direct cost. This is a categorical change from the 2025 environment, in which Gulf states observed the conflict at a remove. As of mid-2026, the Gulf states are participants whose territory has been impacted, whose civilian aviation has been suspended, and whose oil export infrastructure remains exposed. They have unprecedented direct incentive to participate in architecture-design — which the original Section 2 proposal anticipated as a desirable but politically difficult inclusion. Epic Fury has made their participation politically obligatory.

5. The "Broader Peace Agreement" Opening

The White House's 8 April 2026 ceasefire announcement explicitly framed the cessation as occurring "as the Trump Administration negotiates a broader peace agreement." This language is unprecedented in modern U.S.–Iran diplomacy. It signals — however tentatively — that an architectural conversation may be possible in a window the original Section 2 proposal characterized as politically unavailable. The window is narrow: the post-strike negotiating environment will close as Iranian succession concludes, as CRINK reinforcement accelerates, and as U.S. domestic political cycles re-engage. The opening is real and time-limited.

THE STRATEGIC SITUATION AS OF MAY 2026

Iran is weaker tactically and harder strategically. The kinetic instrument has demonstrated its ceiling. The Gulf states are directly exposed. The CRINK alignment is hardening. A succession is unfolding under wartime conditions. And a "broader peace agreement" is being discussed in language no administration has used about Iran in two decades. The architecture-level conversation the diagnostic has called for is now both more difficult and more possible than at any point since 1979.

WHAT THE DIAGNOSTIC NOW REQUIRES

The original Section 2 proposal stands as the underlying framework. But it must be refined for a strategic environment that is different in five concrete ways from the one in which it was originally drafted. The reframe must now:

- Function across *multiple possible successor profiles* in Iran
- Treat *CRINK* as a *structural constraint*, not a removable obstacle
- Acknowledge the *kinetic ceiling* openly, as the strategic premise
- Center the *Gulf states as architects*, not as affected parties
- Operate within the *narrow window* created by the April 8 negotiating opening

Section 4 builds out what this refinement requires.

The Refined Reframe and Phased Sequence

What changes in the architecture · what the April 2026 opening makes possible · what must be sequenced now

THE REFINED REFRAME

The Section 2 reframe was: *"What regional security architecture would make Iranian nuclear restraint compatible with regime survival, while remaining verifiable and durable across U.S. political cycles?"*

The post-Epic-Fury reality requires refinement on five vectors:

REFINED REFRAME

"What regional security architecture would make Iranian nuclear restraint compatible with regime survival under a post-Khamenei succession leadership, while centering the Gulf states as co-architects who have now experienced direct cost, navigating the deepened CRINK alignment as a structural constraint to be managed rather than a target to be erased, accepting the empirical kinetic ceiling as the strategic premise, and using the narrow April 2026 negotiating window before it closes?"

The refined frame is longer because the new constraints are real and cannot be hidden. The discipline of the method is that constraints get named, not papered over.

THE FIVE LAYERS — REFINED FOR THE NEW REALITY

LAYER	SECTION 2 (BASELINE)	REFINED (POST-EPIC FURY)
1. Regional Security Architecture	Multi-party framework including Iran and Gulf states	Gulf states as <i>co-architects</i> , not participants; Saudi-Iran rapprochement (China-brokered, 2023) as the seed structure
2. Strategic Calculation Modification	Address Iranian regime perception of existential threat	Must function under <i>two possible successor profiles</i> (hardline / pragmatic); instruments designed to remain valuable to either
3. Verification Regime	IAEA-led, reinforced by national means	Must include <i>continuous monitoring of underground sites</i> , given demonstrated reconstitution capability; possibly novel transparency instruments (resident inspector regimes)
4. Sequenced Implementation	Reversibility windows + review points	More patient sequencing; <i>multi-year confidence cycles</i> ; trust-deficit acknowledged as starting point, not endpoint
5. Multi-Cycle Durability	Treaty status or multi-party guarantees	CRINK acknowledgment in architecture; <i>great-power forbearance</i> rather than great-power consent as the achievable standard

WHY THIS IS HARDER NOW AND MORE POSSIBLE NOW

The refined reframe is operating under conditions that did not exist at the time of the original Section 2 proposal. Both directions are real.

What makes it harder

- Trust deficit at the leadership level is at its maximum (the U.S. killed the previous leader)
- CRINK is operational, not merely rhetorical
- Successor pool's identity and orientation are unknown
- U.S. domestic political environment for regime-security signals to Iran is more constrained, not less
- The negotiating window is time-limited and will close as the succession concludes

What makes it more possible

- The kinetic ceiling is now public knowledge; both sides know strikes don't produce terminal value
- Iran's tactical position is genuinely degraded — leverage exists that did not exist in 2024
- Gulf states have direct skin in the game; their architectural participation is no longer politically optional for them
- The April 8 "broader peace agreement" framing is a public commitment that creates negotiating obligation
- A new Iranian leader, particularly a pragmatist, has career incentive to differentiate from Khamenei's strategy
- The 8-month recurrence interval (Midnight Hammer → Epic Fury) makes the case to U.S. domestic audiences that the cycle is real and the current frame is broken

THE METHOD'S WINDOW

Structured Reframing identifies windows when category errors become legible to actors who had previously been protected from seeing them. The April 2026 environment is such a window. The kinetic frame's defenders cannot now claim Epic Fury terminated the problem — Iran has restored sites within hours. The reframed alternative's defenders cannot claim the architecture work is easy — succession, CRINK, and trust deficits make it harder than at any point since 1979. *Both honest constraints are visible at the same time, which is the condition under which strategic reframing actually happens.*

The Phased Sequence and Final Verdict

Five phases over five to ten years · what would have to be true at each · the honest comparison

THE FIVE-PHASE SEQUENCE

The refined solution unfolds in five sequenced phases. Each phase has a defined window, named participants, named deliverables, and a defined gate to the next phase.

- 1 Phase 1 — Use the April 2026 Window (0–12 months).** IAEA inspector return as immediate concrete step. Strait of Hormuz reopening verified. Initial confidence-building measures: deconfliction lines, military-to-military hotline restoration, joint mechanism for accidental escalation. Iran's new leadership emerges; the U.S. signals openness to architectural conversation without specifying terms. Gate to Phase 2: ceasefire holds for 12 months.
- 2 Phase 2 — Establish the Regional Forum (12–24 months).** Multi-party regional security forum convenes — Iran, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, the U.S., the EU. Initial agenda: deconfliction protocols, freedom of navigation, proxy-conflict de-escalation in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria. Israel observes-and-participates ambiguously. China and Russia briefed but not at the table (CRINK acknowledgment without CRINK co-authorship). Gate to Phase 3: forum produces one binding deconfliction agreement.
- 3 Phase 3 — Strategic Calculation Modification (24–36 months).** Hardest phase. U.S. and Iran exchange initial regime-security signals (non-aggression in exchange for verifiable enrichment suspension above threshold). Iran's new leadership has had two years to establish legitimacy; signals are calibrated to whichever profile has emerged. Sanctions architecture adjusted in graduated tranches matched to verified Iranian steps. Gate to Phase 4: verified compliance over 12 months.
- 4 Phase 4 — Formal Architecture (36–60 months).** Multi-party regional security treaty proposed. Senate ratification pursued where possible; multi-party guarantees substituted where not. Continuous-monitoring verification regime operational at underground sites. Gulf states have ratified their participation. CRINK accommodation is acknowledged, not concealed: China and Russia are not parties but their non-spoiler role is named in side agreements. Gate to Phase 5: architecture survives one U.S. administration transition.
- 5 Phase 5 — Self-Stabilization (60–120 months).** Architecture functions without continuous high-level U.S. management. Regional forum becomes routine. Verification regime is institutional. Iranian succession dynamics stabilize within an architecture that makes nuclear restraint the lower-cost path. The terminal-value condition is reached: *the recurrence pattern has been broken not because the underlying tensions have ended, but because the architecture absorbs them at lower cost than the previous strike-recurrence cycle.*

THE HONEST COMPARISON

The dominant frame ("stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons") has now produced two operations in eight months. Future iterations are inevitable under the current frame: the architecture that produces Iranian nuclear-hedging behavior is unchanged, and is now *more committed* after Epic Fury, not less. The honest forecast for the dominant frame is a recurrence interval of 6–18 months, escalating in size each iteration, with eventual probability of broader regional war.

The refined reframe is expensive in different currencies: it requires U.S. willingness to constrain future flexibility, regime-security signals to a regime the U.S. has just attacked, acceptance of Gulf-state co-authorship, and patience across multiple administrations. These are real costs. The dominant frame's defenders are correct that the alternative is politically expensive.

The refined reframe's defenders are correct on a different point: the dominant frame is *also* expensive, in repeated operations, in degraded U.S. interceptor stockpiles, in regional infrastructure damage, in Gulf state instability, in proliferation-norm erosion, in CRINK hardening, in the strategic distraction of cyclical Iran crises across multiple decades, and — most consequentially — in the unbuilt regional architecture whose absence allows every other Middle East problem to compound. *Epic Fury demonstrated that the dominant frame has no terminal value.* Its expense is recurring without bound.

FINAL VERDICT

Operation Epic Fury did not refute Section 1 of this paper. It validated Section 1 of this paper. Within eight months of "Operation Midnight Hammer" concluding, an operation an order of magnitude larger was required against the same target set — and that operation, too, did not terminate the architecture problem. The next operation will be required within months to a few years; it, too, will not produce terminal value. The recurrence pattern is now a public fact, not an analytical prediction. The April 2026 negotiating window is the moment when this fact is most legible. The method's verdict is unchanged from the original Section 2: *the architectural alternative is expensive and uncertain; the kinetic recurrence is also expensive and is certain.*

The choice is not between an expensive solution and a free one. It is between an expensive solution with a chance of terminal value and an expensive recurring expenditure that, having been demonstrated twice in eight months, can no longer credibly claim it might end the problem.

FOR THE PRACTITIONER

Iran is the canonical example of why the method matters where stakes are high and audiences reward single-frame narratives. The same diagnostic that catches DOGE (Master Handbook Case 6), Boeing (Case 7), and Brexit (Case 8) catches the strike-and-recur frame here. The patterns are constant; the method works whenever someone is willing to do the architectural work the dominant frame refuses.

— Avansys Lab, May 2026. Methodological, not partisan: applies Structured Reframing without endorsing specific policy outcomes. Expanded to incorporate Operation Epic Fury and the recurrence pattern it confirmed.