

# Defeating Iran's Strategy: Energy Security and the "Abraham Shield"

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

**Tehran is targeting the soft underbelly of the U.S.-Israeli campaign—the oil sector and vulnerable Middle Eastern states—but allied officials can counter this strategy by taking concerted steps to bolster their regional partners, stabilize oil markets, and suppress the regime's military capabilities.**

**T**wo strategies are currently competing in the Iran war. On one hand, the United States and Israel are focused on degrading Iran's ability to threaten the region while promoting regime change. To this end, they are waging an overwhelming—but time-limited—combined campaign to decapitate the regime's leadership and destroy its offensive capabilities, including nuclear assets, missiles, drones, naval forces, proxy terrorist elements, and the industries that could enable their reconstitution. In parallel, they seek to degrade the regime's domestic oppressive apparatus—especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Basij, and various internal security forces—and encourage internal elements to overthrow the regime.

On the other hand, Tehran is focused on surviving and maintaining its domestic security while simultaneously imposing high costs on its enemies, with the goal of ending the war on its terms, deterring future U.S.-Israeli attacks, and deterring neighbors from hosting American military forces. It has advanced this strategy by rapidly replacing officials killed by allied attacks, conducting missile and drone strikes throughout the region, and drawing foreign proxy forces into the fighting (mainly [Iraqi militias and Lebanese Hezbollah](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/countering-threats-irans-proxies-and-partners-during-wartime>) so far). Most important, it is targeting the allies' soft underbelly by [disrupting the flow of energy](#)

<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/energy-and-shipping-risks-iran-war>) from the region.

Using a combination of verbal threats against ship traffic through the Strait of Hormuz, limited strikes on a few vessels, energy, and maritime infrastructure targets, and [small-scale mine-laying](#)

[\(https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog\\_entry/iran-has-laid-about-a-dozen-mines-in-strait-of-hormuz-sources-say/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/iran-has-laid-about-a-dozen-mines-in-strait-of-hormuz-sources-say/), Iran has managed to raise energy prices and exert pressure on economies around the world—including in the United States, which is feeling the political effects of this economic pressure in the midst of an election year.

How can Washington and Jerusalem defeat this Iranian strategy while advancing their own? The best way to start is by understanding the specific vulnerabilities Tehran is exploiting.

## The “Regional War” Strategy

By expanding its attacks to all of the Gulf states, Jordan, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Cyprus, Iran has created the appearance of a “regional war.” The regime hopes that the prospect of a wider conflict will pressure its enemies to end the fighting while improving its own postwar bargaining power.

As of March 11, most of Iran’s roughly [4,000 missile and drone attacks](https://x.com/mdubowitz/status/2031787868654346663) had targeted the United Arab Emirates (44%) and Kuwait (24%). Other states received a lesser share of strikes: Israel (14%), Bahrain (9%), Saudi Arabia (4.5%), Qatar (3.6%), and Oman (0.5%), along with a few attacks against Jordan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Cyprus. Several of these countries took steps to mediate the war before it broke out, but none of these efforts spared them from Iran’s aggression. The regime has also been deliberate about attacking civilian targets, including commercial ports, shopping centers, energy facilities, water plants, data centers, airports, residential towers, and hotels.

The fact that the UAE has been Iran’s primary target comes as little surprise given its status as a prosperous, tolerant, and moderate Muslim country that helped pioneer the Abraham Accords with Israel. Tehran clearly hopes to undermine the country’s image as a safe hub for business, trade, and tourism while showing there are costs to taking the lead on normalization with Israel.

To some degree, Iran’s regional attacks have boomeranged by isolating it further and pushing its victims to recalculate their war policy. Yet the Gulf states remain wary about counterattacking, especially via high-profile strikes. For example, Abu Dhabi [has strongly denied](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-889231) leaks about Emirati attacks on Iran.

The wide variation in regional war readiness is another challenge. For example, Israel’s history has led it to develop a highly effective network of advanced air defenses, early warning systems (including location-specific sirens, messaging, and cellphone apps), extensive public shelter infrastructure, safe rooms in many buildings, and well-prepared emergency, rescue, and medical services. Other countries are less prepared, however, while their proximity to Iran exposes them to shorter-range attacks that complicate timely detection, warning, interception, and protection efforts.

## The Anti-Energy Strategy

In response to Iran’s disruption of regional energy flows, the United States and its partners have taken a number of important steps so far. U.S. forces [destroyed](https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/iran-news/article-889602) most of the Iranian navy, including minelayers. The International Energy Agency sought to reduce oil prices by [organizing](https://www.wsj.com/business/energy-oil/iea-proposes-largest-ever-oil-release-from-strategic-reserves-275f4e5c) the release of 400 million barrels of crude from emergency stocks in multiple countries. And in Washington, President Trump [offered](https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/us-considering-oil-tanker-insurance-support-ease-middle-east-crude-shipments-2026-03-03/) insurance support for tanker owners, [released](https://www.energy.gov/articles/united-states-release-172-million-barrels-oil-strategic-petroleum-reserve) 172 million barrels from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, stated that the U.S. Navy could escort ships through the Strait of Hormuz, threatened Iran with harsh retribution if it mined the strait, and

gave various (though sometimes contradictory) public signs that the war would end soon.

Yet these measures have had limited impact on rising [oil prices \(https://oilprice.com/oil-price-charts/\)](https://oilprice.com/oil-price-charts/), with Brent crude increasing from \$73 per barrel on the eve of the war to over \$100 as of this writing. Iran continues to attack ships, ports, and energy utilities. And although it has seemingly avoided inflicting large-scale, long-term damage on these sectors, shipowners remain hesitant to transit Hormuz—in part because U.S. Navy officials and Energy Secretary Chris Wright [have indicated \(https://www.cnbc.com/2026/03/12/energy-secretary-wright-says-us-not-ready-to-escort-tankers-through-strait-of-hormuz-yet.html\)](https://www.cnbc.com/2026/03/12/energy-secretary-wright-says-us-not-ready-to-escort-tankers-through-strait-of-hormuz-yet.html) it will be some time before any military escorts can actually begin given the still-high risk levels in the narrow strait.

Meanwhile, the flow of Iranian oil has continued as normal—to the tune of around 1.5 million barrels loaded per day, most of it bound for China. Rather than taking physical measures that would close Hormuz to all traffic (e.g., large-scale mining), Iran is selectively regulating the waterway, deterring most transits through a combination of hostile rhetoric and limited strikes while still generating revenue through its own shipments (and, in the process, maintaining good relations with China).

## Reopening the Strait

**D**efeating Iran’s anti-energy strategy will be challenging, but not impossible. Direct military efforts to secure oil shipments through Hormuz—such as naval escorts, demining efforts, and suppressing Iran’s drone, missile, and antiship capabilities—could help open the strait but are risky, costly, time-consuming, and potentially insufficient to restore energy flows, as even residual Iranian attack capabilities might still be enough to terrorize shipowners, oil traders, and insurers. On March 14, President Trump stated that U.S. forces will be addressing this threat by “bombing the hell out of” Iran’s shoreline and “continually” targeting Iranian vessels. He also [expressed \(https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/116227904143399817\)](https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/116227904143399817) hope that other countries affected by the Hormuz situation will send warships to the area and has been pressuring some governments to meet that expectation.

Allied forces could also try indirect alternatives for reopening the strait by turning Tehran’s logic against it. The basic premise of the regime’s strategy is that its own vessels can sail through Hormuz and transport oil while others cannot. This premise needs to be forcefully flipped—that is, if other countries cannot safely transit the strait, neither can Iran. In recent days, the U.S. military signaled that it may be headed in that direction by [striking \(https://x.com/CENTCOM/status/2032777791247155482\)](https://x.com/CENTCOM/status/2032777791247155482) military targets on Kharg Island, Iran’s main oil terminal and a salient chokepoint. Notably, the operation avoided hitting the island’s energy infrastructure, though the White House [warned afterward \(https://www.cnbc.com/2026/03/16/trump-iran-kharg-island-strikes-oil-exports.html\)](https://www.cnbc.com/2026/03/16/trump-iran-kharg-island-strikes-oil-exports.html) that further strikes may be launched against those targets if the regime continues threatening the strait.

Another option that Washington has reportedly [considered \(https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/oil-shock-worsen-should-us-israel-seize-irans-kharg-island-jp-morgan-says-2026-03-09/\)](https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/oil-shock-worsen-should-us-israel-seize-irans-kharg-island-jp-morgan-says-2026-03-09/) is seizing the island, which would require ground forces. On March 13, a U.S. Marine expeditionary unit and amphibious assault ship were [ordered \(https://www.military.com/daily-news/headlines/2026/03/14/us-sends-marines-toward-strait-of-hormuz-crisis.html\)](https://www.military.com/daily-news/headlines/2026/03/14/us-sends-marines-toward-strait-of-hormuz-crisis.html) to the region, though no specific information has been given about the purpose of the deployment. In any case, this option is fraught with military hazards and possible counterstrikes that could roil global markets even further, so any potential plans for taking the island would need to be handled very carefully.

Yet another option is to establish an outside blockade on tankers from Iran after they exit Hormuz. U.S. authorities have already begun seizing Venezuelan “shadow fleet” tankers and could expand this tactic by seizing ships carrying illicit Iranian oil cargoes in other waterways. Taken together, sanctioned Iranian, Venezuelan, and Russian tankers

may be carrying several hundred million barrels of oil. Yet any decisions about taking further action against such vessels would need to consider Washington's **posture toward Russia** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-russia-benefits-oil-disruption-gulf>) as well as President Trump's scheduled March 31 visit to Beijing.

In short, defeating Iran's energy-disruption strategy will require a more integrative combination of defensive military measures, offensive operations, forceful leverage, coordinated energy resource management, nimble market adaptations, and careful, consistent public messaging. And even then, allies should be prepared for the possibility that the market disruptions will not substantially abate before the fighting stops.

## **From “Shield of Judah” to the “Abraham Shield”**

**T**he current war is quite forcefully illustrating the common threat that Iran poses to most countries in the region (and beyond), and their collective need to defend against it. At the same time, the crisis is putting allied relationships to the test. Tehran would be happy if regional governments concluded that hosting U.S. forces and seeking ties with Israel will bring them painful punishment rather than protection. To prevent that outcome, Israel and the United States will have to seize the present opportunity by demonstrating their value to partners and strengthening the regional security architecture.

So far, Washington has provided its partners with potent early warning and air defense systems (e.g., THAAD and Patriot batteries) and deployed relevant American units to the region (e.g., Aegis destroyers), while Israel has **provided** (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2026-03-08/ty-article-magazine/.premium/how-israeli-air-defense-systems-are-helping-shield-allies-from-irans-attacks/0000019c-cda8-dd5f-a1de-dfb9dceb0000>) Barak and SPYDER air defense systems. Both allies have also been striking Iran's most threatening offensive capabilities. In addition, Ukraine has **sent military experts and equipment** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-should-jump-ukraines-outreach-middle-east>) to several Gulf countries to share the experience and technology it has developed in defending itself against Russian attacks—particularly those involving Iranian-made drones.

In the bigger picture, Washington and Jerusalem should be thinking about how they will advance a common security architecture for the Middle East while transitioning from the “Shield of Judah” (the original Israel Defense Forces code name for the Iran war plan) to the “Abraham Shield,” a strategic concept developed since Israel was moved to U.S. Central Command's area of responsibility in 2021. Before that transition can happen, however, they need to take more immediate steps aimed at defeating Iran's “soft underbelly” strategy and increasing wartime support for Gulf partners:

- **Increase attacks against short-range Iranian threats to Gulf shipping and energy, including missile and drone launchers, units, crews, and stockpiles.**
- **Give partners immediate access to Israeli know-how and experience on homefront defense against missiles and drones, including doctrines, best practices, and relevant technology.**
- **Expedite the transfer of Israeli defensive systems to these partners, especially the UAE. This includes anti-missile/drone technology, and possibly cutting-edge systems like Iron Beam as well.**
- **Start planning a future joint development and equipment effort with select partners. This would have two main benefits: enabling lower-cost stocking of interceptor munitions via mass production, and financing the development of more advanced joint capabilities such as laser interception systems.**
- **Consider having U.S. Central Command lead a regional network of partners to draw operational lessons and improve joint learning related to aerial threats (missiles, drones) and maritime threats (mines, fast boats, coastal fires).**

- Integrate Ukraine into the Middle East learning effort regarding missile and drone threats. Besides taking advantage of Kyiv's exceptional experience, this would be an appropriate response to the growing drone cooperation (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/two-axes-converging-iran>) between Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China.
- Facilitate the transfer of knowledge from active battlefields in Europe and the Middle East to possible future battlefields elsewhere in the world. This means conducting learning processes between relevant U.S. commands (CENTCOM, EUCOM, INDOPACOM) and key regional partners, including joint exercises, project convergence, intelligence and data sharing, and cyber and information warfare.

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Dennis Ross

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# Great Power Competition During (and After) the Iran War

March 18, 2026, starting at 1:00 p.m. EDT (1700 GMT)



Anna Borshchevskaya,  
Souhire Medini,  
Henry Tugendhat,  
Grant Rumley

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