عملية الغضب الملحمي وبنية الشرعية المستعارة: كيف اصطنعت الحرب الأمريكية الإسرائيلية على إيران موافقة التحالف

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المستخلص

في ٢٨ شباط/فبراير ٢٠٢٦، شنت الولايات المتحدة وإسرائيل "عملية الغضب الملحمي"، وهي حملة جوية منسقة استهدفت البنية التحتية النووية الإيرانية، وهياكل القيادة العسكرية، والقيادة السياسية. وفي غضون ٤٨ ساعة، اعترف وزير الخارجية الأمريكي ماركو روبيو علناً بأن العملية لم تكن مبنية على تهديد إيراني وشيك للولايات المتحدة، بل على العواقب المتوقعة للعمل العسكري الإسرائيلي الذي كانت واشنطن تعلم مسبقاً أنه سيمثل شرارة لرد انتقامي إيراني ضد القوات الأمريكية. إن هذا الاعتراف يكتسي أهمية بالغة؛ فهو لا يقتصر على تعقيد المبرر القانوني للعملية فحسب، بل يدفعه إلى الزوال فعلياً. ومع ذلك، استمرت العملية وتصاعدت، ونجحت — من خلال مزيج من الضغوط الهيكلية، وسياسات التحالف، والتبعات المصطنعة — في استدراج شركاء كانوا قد رفضوا المشاركة صراحة في البداية.

تبحث هذه الورقة في تلك الديناميكية؛ وتتساءل كيف تمكنت حرب اختيارية — شُنت دون تفويض من مجلس الأمن الدولي وبُنيت على ذريعة حرب تمت صياغتها بأثر رجعي — من اصطناع مظهر من مظاهر شرعية التحالف في غضون أيام قليلة من ضرباتها الأولى. تستند الورقة إلى مصادر أولية، وتحديداً شهادة روبيو أمام وزارة الخارجية، والسجلات البرلمانية، والبيان المشترك لمجموعة الدول الثلاث، والتعليقات التحليلية باللغة العربية حول الاستراتيجية الإيرانية في الخليج، إلى جانب أبحاث باتريشيا ويتسمان حول حرب التحالفات والشرعية. وتتلخص الأطروحة المركزية في أن آليات "الجر إلى التحالف" التجريبية المشهودة في عملية الغضب الملحمي لم تكن وليدة الصدفة أو فريدة من نوعها؛ بل إنها تمثل منطقاً مؤسسياً ناضجاً لتحويل الحروب الاختيارية أحادية الجانب إلى تدخلات متعددة الأطراف ذات طابع شرعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: عملية الغضب الملحمي، حرب اختيارية، شرعية التحالف، البنية التحتية النووية، الجر إلى التحالف.

Operation Epic Fury and the Architecture of Borrowed Legitimacy: How the US–Israeli War on Iran Manufactured Coalition Consent

Research Paper

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Abstract

On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury, a coordinated air campaign targeting Iran's nuclear infrastructure, military command structures, and political leadership. Within 48 hours, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio had publicly acknowledged that the operation was predicated not on an imminent Iranian threat to the United States, but on the anticipated consequences of Israeli military action that Washington knew in advance would trigger Iranian retaliation against American forces. This admission is significant. It does not merely complicate the legal justification for the operation; it effectively removes it. And yet the operation proceeded, escalated, and, through a combination of structural pressure, alliance politics and manufactured consequence, succeeded in drawing in partners who had explicitly refused to participate at the outset.

This paper examines that process. It asks how a war of choice, launched without UN Security Council authorisation and predicated on a retroactively constructed casus belli, managed to manufacture the appearance of coalition legitimacy within days of its opening strikes. The paper draws on primary sources, namely Rubio's State Department testimony, parliamentary records, the E3 joint statement, and Arabic-language analytical commentary on Iran's Gulf strategy, together with Patricia Weitsman's scholarship on coalition warfare and legitimacy. The central argument is that the mechanisms of

coalition drag visible in Operation Epic Fury are not accidental or sui generis; they represent a mature institutional logic for converting unilateral wars of choice into legitimised multilateral interventions.

Keywords : Operation Epic Fury, War of choice, Coalition legitimacy, Nuclear infrastructure, Coalition drag.

1. A War of Choice in Search of a Cause

There is a moment in most American military operations when the public justification and the operational reality part company. In Iraq in 2003 it happened slowly, over months, as the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction was revealed to have been fabricated or manipulated. In Libya in 2011 it happened more quietly, as a mandate to protect civilians transformed into a regime change campaign without a parliamentary vote. What is striking about Operation Epic Fury is the speed with which that gap opened, and the degree to which it was closed not by denials but by subsequent events on the ground that were deliberately engineered to make the gap irrelevant.

The operation was launched on 28 February 2026 against what US officials described as Iran's nuclear weapons programme and its command-and-control infrastructure. Publicly, the justification rested on three pillars: the imminent threat posed by Iranian nuclear development, Iran's support for proxy forces attacking American troops across the region, and the self-defence provisions of Article 51 of the UN Charter. None of these pillars was new. All three had been deployed in various combinations since the early 2000s. What was new was the candour with which the first pillar was dismantled within 48 hours of the strikes beginning.

Speaking at the State Department on 2 March 2026, Secretary Rubio stated plainly that the United States had known an Israeli strike on Iran was imminent, that this strike would trigger Iranian retaliation against American forces, and that the decision to strike pre-emptively was made to reduce American casualties from that anticipated retaliation. The logic was: Israel will act; Iran will respond against US positions; therefore the US must act first. Senator Mark Warner, appearing before the same committee, contradicted this framing directly: there was, he said, no imminent threat to the United States from Iran. There was a threat to Israel.

It is worth dwelling on what this admission does to the concept of collective self-defence. The United States did not claim that Iran had attacked it; it claimed that Iran would attack it, and that this anticipated attack was itself a consequence of Israeli military action that Washington had foreknowledge of and did not prevent. The chain of causation, in other words, runs from joint American and Israeli military planning, to the Israeli strike, to the anticipated Iranian retaliation, and only then to the pre-emptive American action. The threat that justified American intervention was, structurally, a threat that American and Israeli coordination had itself created. This is not pre-emption in the classical sense; it is closer to a self-fulfilling casus belli.

What makes the Trump administration's public communications around Operation Epic Fury analytically interesting is not merely their content but their register. The deliberate inflation of threat to mobilise support for war is one of the better-documented mechanisms in the study of modern conflict. John Mueller has shown how politicians and what he calls the terrorism industry systematically magnify danger well beyond what the evidence supports, tracing the pattern from the Second World War through the Cold War to the threat of the day. Richard Jackson, working on the language rather than the arithmetic of it, has analysed how the rhetoric of counter-terrorism constructs an enemy of pure evil set against an innocent us, deliberately manipulating public anxiety to justify military action. Both describe a mechanism aimed inward, at a domestic audience whose fear must be raised to the point where it will tolerate the costs of war, in the spirit of the line usually attributed to Senator Vandenberg about needing to scare the hell out of the country.

What is distinctive about the Epic Fury communications is that this inflation was deployed not domestically but diplomatically, directed at a reluctant ally rather than a sceptical public. Speaking to The Daily Telegraph, Trump told Starmer that Iran was responsible for British casualties, people, he said, with 'arms and legs and faces blown up', and that Iran was responsible for ninety-five per cent of such events, without citing a single specific case. In his formal address at the launch of the operation, he catalogued Iranian responsibility for the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing, the USS Cole attack, the killing and maiming of 'hundreds' of American service members in Iraq, and the October 7 attacks on Israel. On Khamenei's death, he declared the Supreme Leader, whom he described as 'one of the most evil people in history', to have had 'the

blood of hundreds and even thousands of Americans' on his hands. The aggregate portrait was of an existential, decades-long, civilisation-threatening evil. What Mueller and Jackson between them allow us to see is that none of this needed to be false to be inflated. The function of the rhetoric is not primarily evidentiary; it is mobilising. Its target in this instance was not the American public but the British government, and its purpose was not to inform a policy debate but to make refusal morally untenable. That is threat inflation operating at the diplomatic level, and it worked.

The operation was further distinguished by its stated objectives, which moved well beyond the degradation of nuclear infrastructure. Both President Trump and Secretary Rubio referred in the opening days to the desirability of regime change in Tehran. Trump, speaking to Fox News, cited his Venezuela strategy as a model, that is, finding a figure within the existing structure willing to carry out American demands. Starmer's public repudiation of this framing, in his statement that 'this government does not believe in regime change from the skies', was notable precisely because it was one of the few moments in the crisis when a Western leader named the objective explicitly and declined to endorse it.

2. The Rubio Admission: When Justification Collapses

The significance of the Rubio admission deserves more sustained attention than it has received in the commentary to date. In most Western analyses, the admission has been treated as an embarrassing slip, a moment of unusual candour that complicates the legal picture without fundamentally altering it. This, I would argue, underestimates what happened. The Rubio statement is not a slip but a confession, made publicly, by the chief diplomat of the United States, that the operation was launched on the basis of anticipated consequences rather than actual threat, and it deserves to be read as such.

Rubio told the Senate committee that the US had 'foreknowledge of the Israeli action' and calculated that Iranian retaliation would follow. The pre-emptive strikes were designed to degrade Iran's retaliatory capacity before that retaliation could occur. Senator Warner's response, that there was 'no imminent threat to the United States of America by the Iranians', was not a partisan intervention but a precise legal observation. Under customary international law, and under the US government's own prior statements on the

threshold for pre-emptive action, an anticipated attack triggered by a third party's military decision does not constitute an imminent threat in the relevant sense.

What the Rubio admission does, then, is collapse the distinction between American self-defence and Israeli offence. The two are retroactively merged: because Israel would act and Iran would respond, US action becomes self-defence. But this logic, taken seriously, means that any party, whether a state, a non-state actor or a coalition partner, can manufacture the preconditions for another party's 'self-defence' simply by announcing or undertaking action that predictably triggers retaliation. The doctrine, if it is a doctrine, is open-ended in ways that should concern anyone interested in the stability of the international order.

The institutional roots of this logic are worth tracing, and they connect to work I conducted in 2014 on the manufacture of radicalisation in Western counter-terrorism practice. Peter Neumann, in his influential 2013 analysis of radicalisation frameworks in International Affairs, identifies a fault-line between what he terms the 'European' and 'Anglo-Saxon' approaches to counter-terrorism. Where the European approach centres on cognitive radicalisation, on belief systems and the ideological conditions that precede violence, the Anglo-Saxon approach is fundamentally behavioural: it asks not what a subject believes but what they are about to do. The policy consequences of this distinction are significant, and they are most visible in the FBI's sting operation methodology, which the NYU Center for Human Rights documented in 2011 as the systematic manufacturing of a 'homegrown threat.' In these operations, the state does not wait for a threat to materialise; it engineers the conditions under which a susceptible individual will express the anticipated violent intent, and then treats that engineered expression as the justification for prosecution. The threat is activated rather than discovered. My 2014 research into this methodology identified a structural pattern that I find myself returning to now. The architecture of anticipation that underpins these operations, namely the identification of a susceptible subject, the engineering of conditions designed to produce the expected behaviour, and the pre-emptive action framed as response, is not confined to the domestic prosecution of individuals.

What the Rubio doctrine reveals is that the same architecture has migrated to the conduct of war between states. The US did not respond to an Iranian attack; it anticipated one, assessed its likelihood on the basis of a joint military decision already taken with Israel, and struck pre-emptively against the retaliation it had helped engineer. Iran was placed in conditions designed to produce the behaviour that justified action already intended. Neumann's framework was not designed with interstate warfare in mind, and I am not claiming he makes this connection himself. But the architecture is the same: anticipated behaviour, manufactured precondition, pre-emptive action framed as response. When the logic migrates from the domestic prosecution of individuals to the conduct of war between states, the stakes of its open-endedness become considerably harder to contain.

There is a precise legal vocabulary for what the Rubio admission discloses, and it is one I have had reason to apply before. The just war tradition, codified in its modern form through the Jus Ad Bellum criteria, requires that any resort to armed force satisfy seven conditions: just cause, right authority, right intention, the goal of peace, proportionality, last resort, and reasonable hope of success. I examined these criteria in detail against the Iraq War of 2003, and what is striking about Operation Epic Fury is not merely that the criteria fail, since they failed in Iraq too, but that the failure pattern is structurally identical, and in one crucial respect more advanced. In Iraq, the Bush administration manufactured certainty about weapons of mass destruction that did not exist, maintaining the fiction until the absence of evidence became undeniable. The just cause was fabricated and subsequently collapsed. In Epic Fury, the Rubio admission short-circuits this process entirely: the just cause was not fabricated but openly conceded as derivative. The US did not claim Iran had attacked it; it claimed it had pre-empted an attack that American and Israeli military coordination had itself made inevitable. Under Jus Ad Bellum, just cause requires either defence against an armed attack or response to a clearly imminent and independently sourced threat. A threat manufactured by the anticipation of consequences flowing from one's own ally's planned military action satisfies neither condition.

The right authority criterion fares no better. As in 2003, there was no UN Security Council authorisation. Trump's War Powers Resolution notification to Congress, submitted two days after operations began and asserting that 'the threat to the United States and its allies became untenable', echoed Bush's

decision to treat Congressional authorisation as a substitute for international legitimacy, bypassing the multilateral framework that the just war tradition in its modern codification requires.

And on right intention, the criterion that Aquinas identified as the one most capable of rendering an otherwise lawful war unlawful through a 'wicked intention,' the Epic Fury record is damning in a way that Iraq was not. Bush maintained, however implausibly, that the intention was disarmament and liberation. Trump and Rubio announced regime change as an objective on the first day. Starmer's public repudiation, in his insistence that 'this government does not believe in regime change from the skies', was not a diplomatic nicety but a precise identification of the right-intention failure at the heart of the operation. The Iraq War's legal architecture, which I argued in detail in 2013 failed every serious Jus Ad Bellum test, has been reproduced in 2026, except that this time the administration did not bother to maintain the fiction. That is not progress; it is the institutional consolidation of the pattern.

It is worth noting that the Rubio admission came not in the context of an intelligence leak or an adversarial press inquiry, but in the context of a Senate committee hearing where the Secretary appeared to be making the case for the operation. This suggests that within the US administration, the logic of anticipated retaliation was not seen as legally or politically problematic. It was offered as a justification, not conceded as a weakness. That, too, is significant. It tells us something about the degree to which certain legal constraints have already been internalised as flexible instruments rather than binding rules.

What happened on 3 March 2026 deserves to be recorded as a separate evidentiary development, because it materially strengthens the analysis above. Following a classified briefing on Operation Epic Fury held by Secretary Rubio, Defense Secretary Hegseth, CIA Director Ratcliffe, and the Chair of the Joint Chiefs, senators emerged and said in public what the administration had apparently been unable to rebut in private. Senator Elizabeth Warren was direct: the Trump administration has no plan in Iran, the war is based on lies, and it was launched without any imminent threat to the nation. Senator Brian Schatz observed that the classified version offered nothing that the public version had not already failed to establish: we remain as confused as the American people are, he said, having been given three, four

or five justifications for this act of war over four or five days, with nothing in the classified session that alleviated that confusion. Senator Rebecca Balint stated plainly that nothing she heard gave her confidence that there was an imminent threat to the United States. Senator Chris Van Hollen connected the legal failure to the political one, noting that what was being heard behind closed doors was essentially what was being said in the public domain, complete incoherence, and that Trump had broken his promise not to drag the country into additional wars. Senator Richard Blumenthal went further, saying he left the briefing more fearful than before that American ground troops would be required to accomplish objectives the administration appeared to have but had never clearly articulated.

The justification problem by this point had become structural rather than incidental. In the four days following the operation's launch, the administration offered four distinct rationales: eliminating Iran's nuclear capacity; destroying ballistic missile infrastructure; achieving regime change; and pre-empting an imminent threat to American forces. Trump himself, in a meeting with German Chancellor Merz on 3 March, appeared to contradict Rubio's own account, saying of Israel: I might've forced their hand. If taken seriously, that statement removes even the residual claim that American action was reactive to Israeli initiative. The administration did not have a tighter story to tell in the classified session. It had the same shifting story told in a more expensive room. The significance of the 3 March briefings for this paper's central argument is precise: the justification collapse that the Rubio admission made visible on 2 March was confirmed, deepened, and placed on the public record by the administration's own inability to resolve it twenty-four hours later. The casus belli did not stabilise. It continued to fragment.

3. The United Kingdom: Coalition Drag in Practice

The British case is the most instructive for understanding how legitimacy is manufactured after the fact, because it is the case where the manufacturing process was most visible. The United Kingdom began the crisis as a refusal and ended it as a participant, not because its government was persuaded but because it was manoeuvred. The distinction matters.

When the operation launched on 28 February, Keir Starmer chaired an emergency COBRA meeting and confirmed that the UK had not participated

in the strikes. The Attorney General's advice, leaked in the days before the operation began, was unambiguous: British participation in offensive operations against Iran without UN authorisation and without evidence of an imminent threat to the United Kingdom would violate international law. This was not a novel position. It was the position the UK government had taken formally, and it had significant public support behind it: YouGov polling conducted in the week before the strikes showed 58 per cent of the British public opposed to allowing American strikes from British bases.

Starmer had also refused access to Diego Garcia and RAF Fairford for offensive operations. This refusal provoked an immediate and personal reaction from Donald Trump. Speaking to The Daily Telegraph, Trump said he was 'very disappointed' in the British Prime Minister, that the delay 'took far too long', and that what had happened between the two countries was something that had 'probably never happened before.' The language was pointed. Trump was not merely expressing frustration; he was placing the refusal in the context of a broader account of British ingratitude and unreliability, linking it explicitly to the Chagos Islands deal and suggesting that Starmer's hesitation over Diego Garcia, a base whose joint status depends on the very sovereignty arrangement Trump had condemned, was a symptom of a deeper failure of alignment.

This is worth pausing over. The Chagos linkage was not incidental. Trump had, in February, warned on Truth Social that Diego Garcia might become critical to any operation against Iran. He had simultaneously withdrawn American support for the Chagos sovereignty deal, calling it 'a very woke thing.' The implication was clear: the price of the special relationship, specifically access to Diego Garcia, was British willingness to subordinate legal and political judgement to American operational requirements. When Starmer refused, he paid the price of public rebuke. The rebuke was calibrated, being 'very disappointed' rather than hostile, but its function was transactional. It was designed to make the cost of refusal visible and the cost of compliance attractive.

What changed the calculus was not an argument but a widening field of consequence. Over the first two days of the war Iran fired across the region at countries that had not struck it, hitting airports and hotels where British citizens were staying and a military base in Bahrain that, in Starmer's own

words, narrowly missed British personnel. There are some 200,000 British nationals in the Gulf. On the evening of Sunday 1 March, in a recorded statement to the nation, Starmer announced that the United States would be permitted to use British bases for the specific and limited defensive purpose of striking Iranian missiles and their launchers, while excluding strikes on political or economic targets inside Iran. The sequence here matters, and it is worth being exact about it, because it is more revealing than the dramatic version usually told. The decision came first. The strike on British soil came after. Just after midnight, hours into the early morning of 2 March, an Iranian-made drone hit the runway at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus, a British Sovereign Base Area. Britain had committed before it was hit, not because of it. The base was struck not as the trigger for British involvement but as confirmation of the logic that had already pulled Britain in: it sat, like every other British asset in the region, inside the blast radius of a war London had declined to start.

Let me be precise about what had happened. The UK had not been persuaded that the operation was legal or justified. Starmer's own language, in his insistence that 'this government does not believe in regime change from the skies' and in his repeated invocations of the 'mistakes of Iraq', made clear that the political and legal objections had not been withdrawn. What had changed was that Britain's neutrality had been rendered structurally impossible by events that were themselves the product of a military operation Britain had explicitly declined to join. Note what this means for the chain of cause and effect. Britain did not move because its own base had been hit; it moved because the entire region in which its citizens, bases and allies sat had become a shooting gallery, and Akrotiri was struck only afterwards. Britain's military footprint in the Gulf, built over decades of security architecture, meant that it could not stand aside from the consequences of a war it had not endorsed. The strike on Akrotiri simply made visible a vulnerability that was already total.

Chris Doyle of the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding put the mechanism plainly in the immediate aftermath: the UK and European states had been excluded from the planning and the decision; if they joined, they would have zero input into how the war was conducted or how it would end. This is precisely the logic of coalition drag. The excluded party is pulled in not through persuasion but through consequence. And once

pulled in, however partially and however defensively, the distinction between participant and non-participant begins to dissolve.

4. The European Dimension: Legitimacy by Association

The British case was the most dramatic expression of coalition drag, but it was not the only one. The E3 joint statement, issued by Britain, France and Germany, merits close reading, because it is a near-perfect example of how legitimacy can be conferred through association without formal participation.

The E3 stated that the three powers 'did not participate in these strikes,' but that they were 'in close contact with our international partners, including the United States, Israel, and partners in the region.' They condemned Iran's 'indiscriminate and disproportionate' missile attacks. They pledged to 'take steps to shield our interests and our allies.' They said nothing about the legality of the original operation. They said nothing about the absence of UN authorisation. They offered no assessment of the Rubio admission or of Warner's counter-testimony.

What the E3 statement did was provide European cover for an operation that European governments had not endorsed and had not been consulted on. The mechanism is worth identifying carefully. By condemning Iranian retaliation as 'indiscriminate and disproportionate' without contextualising it within the operation that had triggered it, the E3 effectively entered the narrative logic of the operation's architects. Iran's retaliation became the salient fact; the prior US-Israeli strikes receded into background. This is a rhetorical move with real political consequences: it places the Europeans within a coalition they never formally joined, on the basis of statements they were politically unable not to make.

Macron's France went further, announcing temporary deployment of nuclear-capable aircraft to allied countries in the region. Germany's Merz stated that Germany 'shares the interests of the US and Israel.' Spain's Sanchez was the outlier: he rejected the operation as leading to a 'more hostile international order,' a statement whose unusual directness only became visible in contrast to the studied ambiguity of his counterparts. The divergence within Europe was real, but the weight of the institutional E3 framework, together with the domestic political costs of being seen as soft on Iran in the immediate

aftermath of missile strikes on European assets, produced a convergence that no formal diplomatic process had achieved.

The Green Party MP Ellie Chowns' description of the strikes as 'irresponsible, provocative and illegal' and her call for Starmer to 'use all UK levers to uphold international law' represented a minority view that was politically marginalised not by being refuted but by being overtaken. Once Britain had committed its bases to the operation, the question of whether it should have done so was no longer the operative one.

5. Iran's Horizontal Escalation: Manufactured Consent and the Exposure of the Bases

Iran's own choices belong in this analysis, but the question worth asking is not the one most commentary has asked. The dominant framing treats Iran's decision to retaliate horizontally across the Gulf as a strategic error, a self-inflicted wound that cost Tehran its regional relationships. Whether it was an error is a judgment that depends entirely on whose objectives one measures it against, and I will return to that. The more revealing question, and the one that matters for this paper, is what the horizontal escalation did to the American project of manufacturing consent. Here the answer is unambiguous. Whatever Iran intended, the strikes on the Gulf became the most effective coalition-building instrument available to Washington, doing the work of drawing in reluctant partners that American persuasion alone had failed to do.

Iran's retaliatory campaign, designated Operation True Promise IV, extended the war's geographic footprint to seven countries within the first forty-eight hours: Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq, with further strikes reaching Oman. The volume was considerable. By the Monday, Iran had fired at least 165 ballistic missiles and several hundred drones at the UAE alone, with comparable barrages against Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain. The targets tell the story. The US Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain was hit. So were Al Udeid in Qatar, Al Dhafra in the UAE and Ain al-Asad in Iraq, where dozens of American personnel sustained concussive injuries. A pair of drones struck Oman's port at Duqm, despite Muscat's long-running role as the quiet mediator between Washington and Tehran. In Jordan, an Iranian strike destroyed a THAAD radar, one of only a handful of such systems in the entire American inventory. The strategic logic,

as reconstructed from Iranian statements and Arabic analytical commentary, was that the Gulf states possessed economic and political leverage over Washington that Israel and Europe did not. Striking Gulf infrastructure would threaten the financial arteries of US strategic posture in the region, and Gulf state pressure on Washington, whether to stop the operation or to seek a ceasefire, would be more effective than direct military resistance. It is worth dwelling on the target set, because it complicates the language of an attack on the neighbours. The installations Iran struck were, overwhelmingly, American: the Fifth Fleet headquarters, Al Udeid, Al Dhafra, Ain al-Asad, the THAAD battery in Jordan. Tehran framed these as strikes on the United States that happened to sit on Gulf soil, not as aggression against the host states as such. That framing is not a neutral fact, but neither is the counter-framing of horizontal aggression against neighbours; each is an interpretation, and the distinction matters for how the escalation is read.

The immediate regional effect is not in dispute, whatever one concludes about Iran's intent. The former Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jassim captured it clearly in a CNN Arabic interview on 1 March: if Iran believed that striking Gulf Cooperation Council states would pressure Washington to halt operations, the strikes produced the opposite of pressure. What they did, in the short term, was transform Gulf states from cautious bystanders, some of whom maintained functioning diplomatic channels with Tehran, into parties with immediate material reasons to want Iranian military capacity degraded. The Omani mediation channel, which had been the most productive diplomatic back-route between Tehran and Washington, was rendered politically inoperative by the strike on Duqm. The UAE's investment in a status of studied neutrality, cultivated over years of careful hedging, was destroyed in an afternoon.

There is a reading of these events, articulated by Hamad bin Jassim and echoed across much of the Arabic commentary in the following days, that treats the horizontal escalation as a clear strategic error. On this account, Iran did not pressure the Gulf states into pressuring Washington; it drove them more firmly into Western security arrangements than any American diplomatic campaign had managed, misreading Gulf state agency by assuming they would respond to material threat by seeking to end its source rather than by deepening the relationships that offered protection. Bin Jassim's observation that Iran's actions had shaken regional trust in ways that

would prove durable was not a diplomatic nicety but an assessment, and it should be taken seriously.

Yet whether this amounts to miscalculation depends on the objective against which it is measured, and that is precisely where the dominant framing is too quick. If Iran's purpose was to preserve its Gulf relationships, the escalation failed. If its purpose was to demonstrate that it could hold the entire American regional infrastructure at risk, impose costs the US administration plainly did not anticipate, and convert a contained bilateral strike into a war with region-wide consequences, then the same actions read very differently. A barrage that the American president did not expect, directed at the most prominent symbols of US power in the region, is a form of strategic communication, and the leverage it generated was real enough that it later sat at the centre of the ceasefire negotiations. To label this simply a miscalculation is to adopt, without acknowledgement, the perspective of the Gulf capitals that absorbed the strikes, and to set aside the perspective of a Tehran trading regional goodwill for strategic reach. The more defensible position is that the verdict is contested, and that its contestability is itself analytically significant: Iran, too, was operating within a logic of manufactured pressure, attempting to engineer the conditions under which Washington's exposed partners would push for restraint.

There is a further consequence of the horizontal escalation that bears directly on the consent argument, and I have developed it at greater length elsewhere. The strikes did more than implicate the Gulf states in a war they had not chosen; they exposed the premise on which those states had hosted American forces in the first place. For decades the bargain was straightforward: the bases provided deterrence and protection, and in exchange the host states accepted the political costs of an American military presence on their soil. The Iranian barrages tested that premise and found it wanting. Bases that were meant to shelter the Gulf states became the very reason they were targeted. Kuwait's civilian airport was struck, Bahrain's Fifth Fleet headquarters was damaged, and Qatar found itself intercepting waves of missiles over a territory smaller than an English county. The protection the bases were supposed to confer did not materialise in the form the host states had been led to expect.

What this reveals is a vulnerability at the heart of American forward-basing as a strategic posture: eight hundred installations worldwide may represent not strategic depth but strategic exposure, since each is a fixed target and each host a co-signatory to whatever conflict Washington elects to enter. The point was made bluntly from within the host-country camp itself, when one prominent Emirati commentator with close ties to his country's leadership suggested it was time to consider closing the American bases, calling them a burden rather than an asset. In fairness, this vulnerability is not wholly new. The sanctuary-like security that US forward bases enjoyed in the unipolar decades after the Cold War was arguably a historical anomaly rather than the natural condition of forward deployment, and exposure has always been latent in the model. What Epic Fury did was make the latent manifest, and do so in front of the very governments whose hospitality the model depends upon.

The Strait of Hormuz dimension deserves a separate note. Iranian threats to close the Strait, or to restrict passage through it, were directed primarily at the Asian energy importers: China, India, Japan and South Korea. The logic was that these states, whose energy security depends on Gulf oil flows, would exert pressure on Washington to end the operation. What the analysis underweighted was that a Hormuz closure would also threaten the Gulf states' own export revenues, creating a symmetry of vulnerability that undermined the leverage Iran was attempting to exercise. The tool was blunter than the strategy required.

The American response to that threat extended the same coalition logic to a wider set of partners, and here the mechanism was stated openly by its architect. If the strikes on the bases dragged the host states in through physical exposure, the contest over the Strait drew in Europe and Asia through economic exposure. With traffic through the Strait reduced to a fraction of its normal volume and oil above a hundred dollars a barrel, the Trump administration pressed European and Asian states to commit warships to reopening it. The justification was revealing. The United States, the president argued, did not depend heavily on the waterway; Europe, China, Japan and others did, and it was therefore for them to bear the cost of keeping it open. It was only appropriate, he said, that the beneficiaries of the Strait should ensure nothing bad happened there, and he extended the same reasoning to Beijing on the grounds that China drew the overwhelming share of its oil through the passage. The demand was backed by pressure on the alliance itself, with the

president warning that a negative response would be very bad for the future of NATO. This is the coalition-drag mechanism articulated without disguise. A war Washington had initiated, and from whose principal economic consequence Washington was comparatively insulated, generated a cost that the administration then sought to distribute onto partners who had neither launched the operation nor been consulted before it began. The British case had to be inferred from the sequence of events; the Hormuz demand required no inference, because the logic was spoken aloud. Consent was not sought as agreement but extracted as the price of exposure, and the alliance framework was invoked less as a community of shared decision than as an instrument for allocating the bill.

6. Does the United States Require Legitimacy?

There is a view, stated with varying degrees of candour, that the question of legitimacy is essentially irrelevant to American military operations. The United States has the capability to act; it has acted without UN authorisation repeatedly; the international system lacks effective enforcement mechanisms against a permanent Security Council member; therefore the legitimacy question is a distraction from the operational reality. This view is sometimes offered descriptively, sometimes normatively. It is worth engaging directly, because it is, I would argue, wrong, not morally but analytically.

The US does require legitimacy, but for specific and bounded purposes. It does not require legitimacy in the sense that illegitimacy will prevent it from acting. Kosovo in 1999, Iraq in 2003 and Libya in 2011: none of them had UN Security Council authorisation in the form that international law requires, and yet all of them proceeded. The operations did not collapse under the weight of legal objection. But legitimacy served, and continues to serve, three functions that are operationally significant.

The first is domestic. Congressional acquiescence, public tolerance of casualty rates and the political sustainability of a long campaign are all easier to maintain under a legitimacy frame than without one. The Biden administration's difficulties in sustaining public and Congressional support for various overseas commitments illustrated this clearly. When the legitimacy frame is absent or contested, the domestic political cost of military operations rises. The Rubio admission accelerated that cost accrual in ways

that the administration will manage but cannot eliminate. What the 3 March classified briefings revealed is that the domestic pressure is not a future risk but a present one. Senators walking out of the briefing were not performing for a foreign audience; they were speaking to American voters. The description of complete incoherence and three, four or five justifications in four days, combined with Senator Warren's direct statement that the war was launched without imminent threat, constitutes exactly the kind of domestic political narrative that historically has done what international condemnation could not. Vietnam demonstrated this. The Iraq War demonstrated it again. The administration's real vulnerability is not at the Security Council but in the domestic conversation that is now opening up, and for any outside party seeking to influence the operation's trajectory, that is where the leverage lies.

The second is burden-sharing. Allies contribute forces, logistics, basing rights, financial support, and diplomatic cover. These contributions are not merely militarily useful; they are politically essential for constructing the narrative of international consensus that allows an operation to be presented as something other than unilateral American action. British participation in Operation Epic Fury, however constrained and however 'defensive', performs this function. Without it, the operation is more visibly what the Rubio admission suggests it is: a bilateral US-Israeli military campaign against a state that did not attack the United States.

The third function is normative. An operation framed as law enforcement, as the elimination of a threat to the international order, carries different long-term costs than one framed as aggression or imperial overreach. This matters not just for current operations but for the precedents that shape future ones. The Rubio admission is damaging precisely because it makes the normative frame harder to sustain. When the Secretary of State acknowledges that the trigger for American military action was not Iranian aggression but anticipated Iranian response to Israeli action, the law enforcement frame is difficult to maintain.

What Operation Epic Fury reveals, then, is not that legitimacy is unnecessary, but that the production of legitimacy has become a sophisticated institutional process in its own right, one that can operate under conditions of significant initial illegitimacy, provided that events can be engineered to retrospectively construct the required consent.

7. Coalition Drag and the Architecture of Consent

Patricia Weitsman, writing in Strategic Studies Quarterly in 2010, identified a tension at the heart of American coalition warfare that the Epic Fury case renders newly urgent. Analysing the contrast between the Gulf War coalition and NATO's Kosovo campaign, Weitsman argued that contemporary coalitions are increasingly assembled not to increase war-fighting effectiveness but to legitimise operations, and that this legitimising function carries its own structural costs. Her central finding bears directly on the present analysis: coalitional war-fighting does not guarantee legitimacy, and in the absence of UN sanction, no coalition size can manufacture what formal authorisation alone confers. She observed further that coalition partners assembled primarily for legitimising purposes may, in practice, occupy space and provide international legitimacy while making little difference operationally, their participation performing a political function whose relationship to the operation's legal standing is at best indirect. The E3 dynamic examined in Section 4 is a near-perfect illustration of this mechanism. Britain, France, and Germany provided the appearance of Western consensus without endorsing the operation, without having been consulted on it, and, in Britain's case, while explicitly repudiating its stated objectives. They occupied diplomatic space and conferred legitimacy cover. Whether that cover carries the legal weight its architects intended is precisely the question Weitsman's framework raises but does not fully answer.

What Operation Epic Fury reveals, however, is a mechanism that Weitsman's framework does not account for, because none of her cases quite resembles it. Her analysis assumes that coalition partners, however reluctant, make a choice to participate, and that the decision to join, even under pressure, remains a sovereign act of will. Britain's trajectory in Epic Fury disrupts that assumption. The United Kingdom did not choose to participate. It refused, explicitly and on legal advice, and then found that its refusal had been rendered structurally impossible by events that were themselves the product of a military operation it had declined to join. Britain was not persuaded that the operation was legal or just. Starmer's language made clear that neither the legal position nor the political objection had been withdrawn, and the basing decision was taken before the drone ever reached Akrotiri. What the widening Iranian campaign did was eliminate the operational space within which neutrality could be sustained. Britain's military infrastructure in the Gulf, built

over decades and deeply enmeshed in the region's security architecture, meant that it could not remain genuinely uninvolved in a war being fought within range of its assets. Coalition drag, as I am using the term, describes precisely this: not the persuasion of a reluctant partner, nor even the burden-sharing pressure that Weitsman analyses, but the structural elimination of the non-participation option through engineered or foreseeable consequence. The excluded party is not argued into the coalition. It is placed in conditions where staying out costs more than going in, and where those conditions were created by the very operation it refused to endorse.

This mechanism, anticipated consequence as a substitute for consent, connects in a different register to the distributed responsibility logic that Ali Hachani has identified in his newly published analysis of proxy fragmentation strategies in the contemporary Middle East. Hachani's framework operates at the level of armed non-state actors and their state sponsors, examining how regional powers achieve strategic objectives while distributing responsibility across proxy forces, each of which can be presented as pursuing autonomous interests. The sponsoring power maintains what he calls strategic distance, close enough to direct and far enough to disclaim. The surface-level parallel with Epic Fury's coalition construction is imperfect: this is direct interstate warfare, not proxy fragmentation, and the actors involved are sovereign governments rather than armed militias. But the underlying logic of distributed responsibility is structurally identical. By attributing American military action to anticipated Israeli-triggered retaliation, Rubio distributed the responsibility for the operation's initiation across multiple actors: the Israeli decision, the anticipated Iranian response, and the need to protect American forces already in the region. No single actor appears to own the decision to go to war. Israel triggered it; Iran made it necessary; the US responded. This distribution of responsibility is not merely a rhetorical move, though it is that too. It is a structural feature of how the operation was designed, communicated and subsequently legitimised, and it mirrors, at the level of coalition warfare, the same architecture of deniability that Hachani identifies at the level of proxy conflict.

What both Weitsman's scholarship and Hachani's framework contribute to this analysis, from different analytical traditions and at different levels of conflict, is a shared recognition that the mechanisms now visible in Operation Epic Fury are not improvisations. They have been developed, tested, and

refined across decades of American coalition-building in the Middle East and across the longer history of proxy warfare in the region. The architecture of borrowed legitimacy that this paper's title invokes is institutional rather than accidental. It has been designed. Understanding it as such, rather than as a series of ad hoc diplomatic manoeuvres produced by the peculiarities of the Trump-Starmer relationship or the specific geography of British Gulf assets, is the precondition for any serious account of the costs it imposes on international order, and for any serious effort to develop the structural responses that the current debate conspicuously lacks.

8. The Costs of Borrowed Legitimacy

The architecture described in the preceding sections has costs. I want to be careful here not to assume that the costs fall only on the obvious losers: Iran, the Iraqi and Lebanese populations absorbing the displacement and instability of regional spillover, and the Yemeni civilians caught in whatever Houthi-related escalation follows. Those costs are real and disproportionately borne by populations with the least agency in determining the war's course. But the architecture also imposes costs on its architects and on the states that were dragged into it. Those costs are worth identifying, because they are the ones most likely to shape the next iteration of this logic.

For the United States, the most significant cost of Operation Epic Fury is evidentiary. The Rubio admission has entered the public record. It will be cited in every future debate about the threshold for American pre-emption. It will be deployed by adversaries, China, Russia and Iran itself, in future arguments at the UN and before international bodies about the consistency of American legal commitments. The administration will manage this, and it will do so through the familiar combination of procedural complexity, allied endorsement, and the passage of time. But the admission has a durability that cannot be entirely neutralised.

For the United Kingdom, the cost is structural. Britain has once again found itself in a military operation it did not initiate, could not prevent, and cannot exit cleanly, having been drawn in through the logic of its own military presence in the region. The Iraq comparison that dominated British commentary was apt not because the situations are identical, which they are not, but because the structural dynamic is the same: a close ally launches an

operation, British assets are implicated before a decision is formally taken, the political cost of refusal eventually exceeds the political cost of participation, and Britain enters a war it had formally declined to join. The Iraq inquiry's central finding, that Britain was committed to action before the conditions for legal participation had been established, finds an echo here, even if the specifics differ.

Starmer's formulation, that 'this government does not believe in regime change from the skies', deserves more attention than it received. It is a principled statement that distinguished the UK's participation from an endorsement of the operation's stated objectives. The question is whether that distinction is durable. Once a country's bases are committed to an operation and its aircraft are airborne in the region, the operational reality tends to absorb the principled qualification. The history of British involvement in American-led Middle Eastern interventions suggests that the distinction between defensive participation and operational endorsement is difficult to maintain over time.

For Iran, whatever one concludes about the wisdom of the horizontal Gulf escalation, it carried a clear cost alongside whatever leverage it generated: the erosion of its own regional diplomatic architecture. Oman, which had functioned for years as a reliable back-channel, is now a damaged party. The UAE's studied neutrality is gone. Qatar, which hosts both American military capacity and had maintained workable lines to Tehran, is now within the conflict's operational envelope. The toolkit of Iranian regional influence, cultivated over a decade of careful relationship management alongside proxy force deployment, has been significantly degraded not by American or Israeli action alone but by Iran's own retaliatory choices.

The Gulf states face a paradox of their own. Iranian strikes have, as Hamad bin Jassim observed, driven them more firmly into Western security arrangements. But those arrangements are underwritten by a United States whose reliability as a guarantor is itself under question, not because of the Iran operation but because of the broader pattern of Trump administration behaviour toward its partners. The Gulf states are more deeply embedded in a security architecture that they have less capacity to shape than at any point in the past decade. That is a cost, even if it does not immediately present itself as one.

9. Conclusion

Operation Epic Fury is not yet over as this paper is written, and its full consequences, military, political, economic and regional, cannot be assessed with any confidence. What can be assessed, at this early stage, is the mechanism by which a bilateral US-Israeli military operation succeeded in constructing the appearance of multilateral legitimacy within days of its opening strikes.

The process had three components. The first was the engineering of a casus belli that distributed responsibility across multiple actors, Israeli action, anticipated Iranian retaliation and American pre-emption, in a way that made the operation appear reactive rather than initiated. The Rubio admission inadvertently made this distribution visible, but it did not undo it. The second was the structural maneuvering of reluctant partners: placing them in situations where non-participation imposed costs they could not politically absorb, while ensuring that participation remained characterisable as defensive and therefore legally defensible. Britain is the most visible example, but the E3 dynamic operated through a similar logic. The third was the absorption of Iran's horizontal escalation into the same logic: whatever Tehran intended by striking American assets across the Gulf, the effect was to transform potential restrainers into co-interested parties and to supply Washington with the very consequence through which reluctant partners were drawn in.

Hachani's parallel analysis of proxy fragmentation strategies independently identifies the same distributed responsibility logic at work at the level of armed non-state actors and their state sponsors, confirming that the underlying architecture is not peculiar to Epic Fury but consistent across registers of conflict in the contemporary Middle East. What varies is the scale of the actors and the visibility of the violence. The coalition drag mechanism identified in this paper is the more precise analytical contribution: the structural elimination of non-participation through engineered consequence, operating below the threshold of formal alliance obligation and beyond the reach of conventional diplomatic refusal.

The implications for the international order are serious. An international system in which the threshold for pre-emption is effectively 'we anticipated

that our ally's action would trigger retaliation against us' is a system in which any closely aligned pair of states can manufacture the legal justification for offensive operations against a third party. The Rubio doctrine, if it becomes a precedent, is not a narrowing of the circumstances under which force can be used; it is an expansion of those circumstances to the point of near-elimination. That consequence may be the most significant cost of Operation Epic Fury, more significant, in the long run, than the military outcomes it produces.

What is needed now, and what is conspicuously absent from the current policy debate in both Washington and London, is a serious reckoning with the structural dynamics that make these operations possible: the Gulf security architecture that implicates British and European assets in American operations whether or not their governments consent; the alliance politics that make refusal prohibitively costly; and the diplomatic frameworks that have atrophied to the point where they cannot generate meaningful pressure for restraint before military operations begin. These are not new problems, but Operation Epic Fury has given them a new urgency.

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