Policy Brief

What Cannot Be Recovered Cannot Be Leveraged:

Debris, Evidence, and Power in the Iran Battlefield

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Date: April 05, 2026

Series Information:
This policy brief is part of the EPINOVA Policy Brief Series on Strategic Competition, AI-Enabled Warfare, and Information Conflict.

Recommended Citation:
Wu, Shaoyuan (2026), *What Cannot Be Recovered Cannot Be Leveraged: Debris, Evidence, and Power in the Iran Battlefield*, Policy Brief No. EPINOVA–2026–PB–24, Global AI Governance and Policy Research Center, EPINOVA LLC, https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19432715.

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Key Judgments

- **Recoverability conditions leverage:** Only systems that generate recoverable artifacts can produce observable evidence and, in turn, strategic influence.
- **Debris underpins evidence formation:** Physical remnants enable attribution, support validation, and provide the foundation for narrative construction.
- **Evidence converts into power:** Once documented and circulated, debris-derived evidence enables informational, strategic, and political leverage.
- **Advanced systems face a visibility–leverage gap:** High-end systems tend to generate limited recoverable evidence, while less advanced but recoverable systems often produce greater observable and narratively exploitable impact.

Executive Summary

The 2026 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict highlights a structural shift in modern warfare: battlefield debris has emerged as a critical intermediary between military action and strategic influence.

Across the conflict, recoverable artifacts, including UAV wreckage, munition fragments, and aircraft debris, have played a central role in shaping attribution, narrative construction, and signaling dynamics. Their public dissemination has directly influenced perceptions of operational effectiveness and technological vulnerability.

This brief argues that strategic leverage in contemporary conflict is increasingly conditioned by the recoverability of battlefield artifacts, which determines whether military activity can be observed, verified, and translated into influence.

Systems that do not generate recoverable evidence, regardless of their operational sophistication, face structural limits in visibility and therefore reduced impact in the information domain.

1. The Battlefield as an Evidence Environment

The Iran conflict demonstrates that the battlefield is increasingly functioning as an evidence-generating environment.

Observable dynamics include:

- Systematic circulation of UAV wreckage imagery;
- Use of munition fragments for strike attribution;
- Symbolic deployment of aircraft debris as proof of engagement.

In this context, visual and material evidence has become central to narrative competition, particularly under conditions of contested or ambiguous engagements.

Constraints on external verification, such as limited satellite access or delayed data release, further elevate the strategic importance of physically recoverable evidence.

2. The Recoverability Constraint

This brief introduces the concept of the Recoverability Constraint:

Only systems that generate recoverable artifacts can produce observable, attributable, and exploitable evidence.

Empirical patterns observed in the Iran conflict indicate that the most visible categories of military systems share a common structural characteristic: they produce identifiable and recoverable material residues upon engagement, interception, or failure.

These include, but are not limited to:

- UAV platforms (e.g., MQ-9, Hermes series)
- Precision-guided munition components (e.g., JDAM kits)
- Aircraft debris associated with reported engagements

Such artifacts enable post-strike documentation, visual verification, and iterative circulation across open-source and media environments, thereby entering the observable evidence space.

By contrast, systems characterized by low physical recoverability—including those operating at high altitude, with complete detonation profiles, or with minimal residual signatures—remain largely absent from this space.

As a result, their operational presence is systematically underrepresented, not necessarily due to absence in use, but due to the structural limitation imposed by non-recoverability.

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Table 1. Recoverable Systems and Debris Observed in the Iran Conflict (Claim-Based Reporting, Feb–Apr 2026)

Category	Model (Detailed)	United States	Israel
a) Manned Aircraft & Helicopters	A-10C Thunderbolt II	Shot down (🟠)	—
	F-15E Strike Eagle	—	—
	F-35I Adir (F-35A variant)	—	Shot down (🔴)
	F-16I Sufa (Block 52+)	—	Shot down (🔴)
	F-15I Ra'am	—	Shot down (🔴)
	C-130J Super Hercules (AE2100D3)	Shot down (🔴) / Destroyed (🟡)	—
	UH-60M Black Hawk (T700-GE-701D)	Shot down (🔴)	—
b) MALE / HALE UAVs	MQ-9 Reaper (Block 5)	Shot down (🟡)	—
	Hermes 900 (Kochav)	—	Shot down + Captured (🟡)
	Hermes 450 (Zik)	—	Shot down (🟠)
	Heron Mk I	—	Shot down (🟠)
	Heron TP (Eitan)	—	Shot down (🟠)
c) Tactical UAVs	Skylark I-LEX	—	Recovered (🔴)
	Skylark II	—	Recovered (🔴)
	Orbiter series	—	Recovered (🔴)
d) Cruise Missiles	BGM-109E Tomahawk Block IV	Intercepted (🟡)	—
	BGM-109 Block V (assessed)	Intercepted (🟠)	—
	AGM-158A JASSM	Intercepted (🟠)	—
	AGM-158B JASSM-ER	Intercepted (🟠)	—
	Delilah-AL	—	Intercepted (🟠)
e) Air-Launched Ballistic / High-Speed Weapons	—	—	Rampage (🟠)
f) Precision-Guided Bombs (JDAM / SPICE	GBU-31(V)3 (BLU-109 penetrator)	Debris recovered (🟡)	—
	GBU-31(V)1 (Mk-84)	Debris recovered (🟠)	—
	GBU-38 (500 lb)	Debris recovered (🟡)	—
	GBU-39/B SDB I	Debris recovered (🟠)	—
	SPICE 1000	—)	Debris recovered (🟠)
	SPICE 2000	—	Debris recovered (🟠)

Table 1. Recoverable Systems and Debris Observed in the Iran Conflict (Claim-Based Reporting, Feb–Apr 2026), Cont.

Category	Model (Detailed)	United States	Israel
g) Precision-Guided Bombs (JDAM / SPICE)	GBU-31(V)3 (BLU-109 penetrator)	Debris recovered (🟡)	—
	GBU-31(V)1 (Mk-84)	Debris recovered (🟠)	—
	GBU-38 (500 lb)	Debris recovered (🟡)	—
	GBU-39/B SDB I	Debris recovered (🟠)	—
	SPICE 1000	—	Debris recovered (🟠)
	SPICE 2000	—	Debris recovered (🟠)
h) Anti-Radiation Missiles & Loitering Munitions	AGM-88C HARM	Intercepted (🟠)	—
	AGM-88E AARGM (assessed)	Intercepted (🔴)	—
	IAI Harop (Harpy 2)	—	Shot down (🟠)
	IAI Harpy	—	Shot down (🟠)
i) Electronic & Communication Systems	MQ-9 EO/IR sensor (MTS-B)	Captured (🟠)	—
	UAV SATCOM modules	Captured (🔴)	Captured (🔴)
	Data link modules (Link-16 class)	Disrupted / captured (🔴)	Disrupted (🔴)
j) Recovered Platforms & Critical Components	MQ-9 structural components	Partially recovered (🟠)	—
	Hermes 900 UAV (intact)	—	Fully captured (🟡)
	Missile seekers (unspecified)	Displayed (🟠)	Displayed (🟠)

Table Note:

Categorization: Entries are classified by platform and specific model based on Iranian official statements and affiliated media releases.

Confidence Levels: 🔴 High | 🟠 Medium | 🟡 Low

Methodological Note: The dataset reflects Iranian-reported claims; items without independent verification are retained for analytical completeness and comparative assessment.

Data Scope: Compiled from Iranian official statements, affiliated media, and publicly circulated battlefield imagery (Feb 28–Apr 5, 2026).

Analytical Note: The dataset does not represent a verified inventory, but an evidence environment shaping strategic narratives. No independent confirmation is implied.

3. Debris-to-Evidence Conversion

As shown in Table 1, a wide range of recoverable systems, from UAV platforms to precision-guided munitions, contribute to the formation of observable battlefield evidence.

However, the presence of recoverable debris does not in itself generate strategic value.

Debris must undergo a structured process of transformation before it becomes analytically and politically meaningful.

This process can be conceptualized as a Debris-to-Evidence Conversion chain, consisting of four sequential stages:

Table 2. Conversion Chain Framework

Stage	Function
Debris	Physical remnants generated through engagement, interception, or failure
Documentation	Recording, cataloging, and initial dissemination of artifacts
Validation	Cross-referencing through imagery, geolocation, and OSINT verification
Amplification	Integration into media ecosystems and state-linked narratives

Through this conversion process, debris is transformed from inert material into operationally and politically active evidence.

Once converted, such evidence performs three key functions:

- **Attribution mechanism:** linking actions to specific actors, platforms, or supply chains.
- **Credibility signal:** reinforcing or contesting claims within the information environment.
- **Escalation indicator:** signaling shifts in intensity, capability exposure, or engagement thresholds.

This process is not purely technical, but structurally embedded within the information domain, where visibility, repetition, and narrative integration condition the transformation of evidence into effective influence.

4. Evidence-to-Power Conversion

Once established, evidence enables **multi-domain leverage** by extending its effects beyond the immediate information environment into strategic and political domains.

This transformation can be understood as an **Evidence-to-Power Conversion process**, through which validated and amplified evidence generates influence across three interrelated domains:

4.1 Evidence-to-Power Mechanisms

a) Informational Effects:

- Shapes perception of battlefield outcomes.
- Reinforces or contests narrative credibility.

b) Strategic Signaling:

- Demonstrates the vulnerability of adversary systems.
- Challenges assumptions of technological superiority.

b) Political Effects:

- Supports domestic legitimacy through visible proof of action.
- Influences international positioning, alignment, and perception.

Through these mechanisms, evidence functions not merely as documentation, but as a **force-multiplying instrument** within a networked conflict environment.

Importantly, the conversion from evidence to power is **conditional rather than automatic**. Its effectiveness depends on the credibility of validation, the intensity of amplification, and the receptivity of the surrounding information ecosystem.

Evidence-to-power conversion constitutes the second-stage transformation in the broader Debris-to-Leverage framework, linking observable artifacts to system-level influence.

5. Debris-to-Leverage Conversion

The diversity of systems listed in Table 1 demonstrates that recoverability spans multiple operational domains, reinforcing its role as a **cross-platform driver of strategic leverage**.

This brief introduces **Debris-to-Leverage Conversion (DLC)** as a core analytical concept:

DLC refers to the process through which recovered battlefield artifacts are transformed into strategic influence across technical, operational, and informational domains.

DLC builds upon the preceding stages of **recoverability and evidence formation**, constituting the final step in the transformation from material residue to systemic effect.

5.1 DLC Mechanisms

DLC operates across three interrelated domains:

a) Technical Exploitation

- Extraction of limited insights into system architecture, materials, and interfaces;
- Identification of design features relevant to reverse engineering or system understanding.

b) Operational Adaptation (Countermeasure Development)

- Identification of vulnerabilities in adversary systems;
- Adjustment of defensive measures and engagement strategies;
- Iterative improvement of interception and mitigation capabilities.

c) Narrative Exploitation

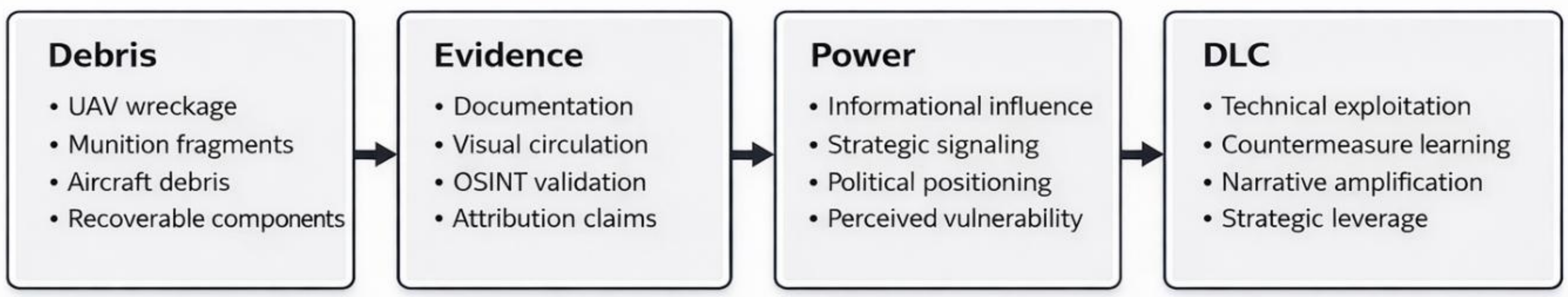
- Use of visual and material evidence in information operations;
- Reinforcement of attribution claims and battlefield narratives;
- Amplification of perceived effectiveness and adversary losses.

In practice, **operational and narrative effects tend to outweigh full technological replication**, particularly under conditions where advanced systems are difficult to reverse engineer but still highly valuable as sources of vulnerability exposure and signaling leverage.

DLC is therefore best understood not as a linear extraction process, but as a **multi-domain amplification mechanism**, in which partial technical insights and highly visible artifacts generate disproportionate strategic effects.

This chain constitutes the intermediate layer linking physical recoverability to strategic leverage, forming the operational bridge between material residue and systemic influence.

Figure 1. Debris-to-Leverage Conversion in the Iran Battlefield



6. The Visibility Gap of Advanced Systems

The relative absence of certain advanced systems from observable battlefield evidence reflects a structural dynamic, rather than a simple lack of operational use.

Systems characterized by high speed, low observability, and self-destructive or complete-detonation impact profiles tend to generate minimal or non-recoverable debris, thereby constraining their presence within the observable evidence space.

This condition produces what can be defined as a Visibility Gap: a divergence between actual operational capability and observable battlefield representation.

Table 3. Structural Visibility Gap Across System Types

System Type	Capability Level	Recoverability	Observable Impact
Advanced systems	High	Low	Limited
Recoverable systems	Moderate	High	Significant

This divergence has several important implications.

First, observable battlefield narratives are not neutral reflections of capability, but are structurally shaped by recoverability conditions.

Second, systems with lower recoverability may experience systematic underrepresentation in attribution, perception, and strategic signaling, despite potentially higher operational effectiveness.

Third, recoverable systems though not always the most advanced may exert disproportionate influence in the information domain, due to their visibility, verifiability, and repeatability.

The Visibility Gap therefore constitutes a structural distortion within the Debris-to-Leverage framework, where the ability to generate recoverable artifacts conditions not only evidentiary presence, but also downstream strategic influence.

7. Startline Asymmetry and Leverage Inversion

The conflict reveals a fundamental asymmetry in how different actors generate strategic influence at the outset of engagement.

Two distinct operational logics can be observed:

a) High-technology model

- prioritizes survivability, precision, and mission efficiency;
- minimizes residual signatures and recoverable debris;
- and, limits downstream evidentiary visibility.

a) Recoverability-centered model

- emphasizes visible and documentable outcomes;
- generates recoverable artifacts across engagements;
- and, enables systematic integration into narrative and signaling frameworks.

This divergence produces what can be defined as a **Startline Asymmetry**: an initial structural imbalance in how systems enter the **Debris–Evidence–Leverage chain**.

c) Result: Leverage Inversion

Under conditions shaped by the Recoverability Constraint and the Visibility Gap, a counterintuitive outcome emerges:

Systems with lower technical sophistication but higher recoverability can generate greater strategic influence than more advanced but low-recoverability systems.

This Leverage Inversion operates through three reinforcing mechanisms:

- **Evidence availability asymmetry:** Recoverable systems are more likely to enter the attribution and validation cycle
- **Narrative amplification bias:** Visible artifacts are more easily integrated into media and state messaging
- **Perception-weighted impact:** Strategic influence is shaped not only by capability, but by what can be seen, verified, and circulated

Taken together, Startline Asymmetry and Leverage Inversion highlight a critical shift in contemporary conflict dynamics:

Strategic influence is no longer determined solely by what systems can do, but by what they leave behind.

8. Strategic Implications

The dynamics observed in the Iran conflict point to a broader transformation in how strategic influence is generated and perceived in contemporary warfare.

- **Visibility as a force multiplier:** Recoverable outcomes extend the impact of military operations beyond their immediate kinetic effects, enabling amplification through attribution, circulation, and narrative integration.
- **Narrative vulnerability of advanced systems:** Systems optimized for survivability and low observability face structural constraints in producing visible evidence, limiting their ability to generate downstream informational and political leverage.
- **Emergence of evidence-centric warfare:** Conflict dynamics increasingly reward systems and operations that produce observable, recoverable, and narratable outcomes, shifting competition toward control over evidence generation and interpretation.

Taken together, these concepts define a recoverability-driven pathway through which material residue is transformed into strategic influence in contemporary conflict.

9. Limitations

This analysis is based on a single conflict environment and relies primarily on claim-based and partially verified data sources.

Accordingly, the findings should be interpreted as indicative of emerging structural patterns rather than universally generalizable dynamics.

Conclusion

The Iran conflict underscores a structural shift in the nature of contemporary warfare: strategic outcomes are increasingly shaped not only by what is destroyed, but by what remains observable.

Recent battlefield dynamics illustrate this pattern clearly.

Incidents involving downed aircraft, UAV losses, and the circulation of wreckage imagery have become central to how the conflict is interpreted and contested, often generating strategic effects disproportionate to their immediate tactical significance.

At the same time, broader dynamics of information competition and narrative contestation indicate that visibility, attribution, and evidence circulation have become integral components of conflict itself.

More precisely:

What cannot be recovered cannot be leveraged.

This principle captures a fundamental transformation:

Strategic influence is no longer determined solely by the ability to project force, but by the capacity to generate and leave behind recoverable, verifiable, and narratable traces within an increasingly networked and perception-driven battlespace.

Taken together, this reflects a recoverability-driven transformation in how influence is generated, perceived, and contested in modern warfare.