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Is the U.S.–Israel–Iran Conflict Entering Phase III?

Residual Target Depletion and the Shift from Asset Destruction to Functional Disruption

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Key Judgments

- **The U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict may be entering a Phase II–III transition, but Phase III has not yet been conclusively established.** Renewed attacks on commercial shipping, new U.S. strikes inside Iran, Iranian retaliatory strikes targeting U.S. military sites in Bahrain and Kuwait, and the erosion of the interim accord mark a significant escalation along the U.S.–Iran axis.
- **A third phase would not replay Phase I.** Earlier phases of the conflict have already destroyed, disabled, evacuated, hardened, dispersed, or repeatedly exposed many visible high-value assets, altering the operational environment in which further escalation would occur.
- **This brief introduces Residual Target Depletion (RTD): the progressive decline in the marginal strategic return from further disruption of previously exposed fixed targets.** RTD does not mean target exhaustion; it means diminishing returns as assets are damaged, disabled, hardened, dispersed, substituted, or repeatedly exposed.
- **As RTD increases, conflict shifts from asset destruction toward functional disruption.** The central question becomes less whether a major installation remains physically intact than whether the functions it once concentrated remain operational elsewhere.
- **The clearest indicator of Phase III would therefore be a sustained change in target logic:** from attacking visible assets and constraining recovery toward disrupting the distributed functions that sustain residual operational continuity.

Executive Summary

The latest escalation along the U.S.–Iran axis raises a central question: is the broader U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict entering Phase III?

The evidence remains inconclusive. Renewed attacks on commercial shipping, new U.S. strikes inside Iran, Iranian retaliatory strikes targeting U.S. military sites in Bahrain and Kuwait, and the erosion of the interim accord place the conflict in a credible Phase II–III transition zone. A durable phase transition, however, requires a structural change in how the conflict operates, not merely a temporary increase in strike intensity.

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If Phase III is emerging, it begins from a fundamentally altered target environment. Phase I centered on coercive escalation and the destruction of visible military, energy, maritime, and strategic infrastructure. Phase II was characterized by incomplete de-escalation, recovery competition, maritime bargaining, and selective retaliation.

After two phases of conflict, many prominent fixed assets have already been damaged, evacuated, hardened, dispersed, repeatedly exposed, or functionally substituted. Their continued physical existence does not imply unchanged strategic relevance.

This brief calls that process **Residual Target Depletion (RTD)**. RTD refers to the declining marginal strategic return from further disruption of previously exposed target categories. It does not mean target exhaustion. Rather, declining marginal returns can shift relative strategic importance toward less visible systems that become increasingly central to operational continuity.

The shift can be summarized as follows:

- **Phase I: Destroy visible assets.**
- **Phase II: Prevent damaged systems from recovering.**
- **Phase III: Disrupt the functions that sustain the residual system**.

A third phase would therefore likely be defined less by the destruction of the largest remaining assets than by competition over residual functionality, including surveillance, communications, mobility, repair, replenishment, maritime support, substitution, and coordination.

The central policy question is no longer only whether the conflict is escalating again. It is whether the object of escalation is changing.

Why This Matters

The distinction between renewed escalation and a new phase has practical consequences. If fighting remains episodic, the principal actors may return to an unstable cycle of retaliation, restraint, and bargaining. If Phase III develops, however, the conflict will become harder to regulate because the remaining operational architecture is more dispersed, interdependent, and increasingly difficult to separate into clearly military and civilian systems.

This reduces the usefulness of conventional target counting. A surviving base, port, radar site, or industrial facility may retain symbolic importance while offering declining operational returns from further disruption. Smaller nodes may become more consequential as they absorb displaced functions. Dispersion also increases ambiguity as capabilities migrate into mobile systems, temporary locations, commercial logistics, and distributed support networks.

Functional disruption therefore carries wider spillover risks. Localized disruptions can propagate across logistics, energy, communications, and coordination systems. A Phase III centered on residual functionality could expand conflict effects into economic, maritime, digital, and third-party systems without a proportional increase in large-scale strikes.

Methodological Note

This brief uses “Phase I,” “Phase II,” and “Phase III” as analytical categories rather than official military designations. The analysis concerns the broader U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict system, while treating the renewed U.S.–Iran direct exchange as the principal source of current phase-transition risk. Developments involving Israel are incorporated where they materially shape the cumulative target environment, recovery dynamics, or broader escalation structure.

Under the EPINOVA chronology, Phase I ran from February 28 to the June 2 transition. Phase II began on June 3 and has been marked by incomplete termination, recurrent violations, recovery competition, maritime confrontation, and selective renewed strikes. All dates are normalized to U.S. Eastern Time, with each analytical day running from 12:00 ET to 12:00 ET the following day.

In this brief, “interim accord” refers to the Islamabad Memorandum of Understanding (Reuters, 2026a, 2026e).

The assessment reflects information available as of July 8, 2026, 08:23 ET. Phase II Day 35—July 7 at 12:00 ET through July 8 at 12:00 ET—was still open, and the conclusions therefore remain provisional.

This brief analyzes changes in conflict structure and target logic. It does not identify future targets, assess the operational vulnerabilities of specific facilities, or provide targeting recommendations.

1. Is Phase III Beginning?

The latest escalation differs from ordinary Phase II friction in both intensity and structure. Renewed attacks on commercial shipping were followed by new U.S. strikes inside Iran and Iranian retaliatory strikes targeting U.S. military sites in Bahrain and Kuwait, restoring a direct escalation loop (Reuters, 2026c, 2026d; U.S. Central Command, 2026):

Commercial-shipping attacks → U.S. strikes inside Iran → Iranian retaliatory strikes targeting regional U.S. military sites → renewed escalation risk

This is more serious than isolated violations, but escalation intensity alone does not establish a new phase. A durable transition would require converging evidence: recurring direct U.S.–Iran strike cycles; loss of practical regulatory effect by the interim accord; a sustained shift from fixed assets toward residual operational systems; growing strategic centrality of distributed, maritime, mobile, and substitute systems; and rising system-level disruption without proportional physical destruction (Reuters, 2026a, 2026c, 2026d, 2026e).

The most important indicator is a change in target logic. Phase III should be identified not simply by an increase in strikes, but by a shift from the strategic objects that defined earlier phases toward the residual functions that sustain the operational system.

On this basis, the broader conflict can reasonably be assessed as entering a Phase II–III transition zone, but a durable Phase III has not yet been conclusively established.

2. Why Phase III Would Not Be a Replay of Phase I

The physical geography of the conflict has not changed, but its strategic geography has. At the conflict’s outset, large fixed assets concentrated personnel, sensors, command functions, logistics, aircraft, energy flows, and political symbolism, making the target environment relatively legible.

Over time, however, destruction, disablement, evacuation, hardening, dispersion, and functional substitution alter the value of such assets. Some facilities lose capacity; others remain physically intact but operate at reduced levels; still others lose personnel or functions to alternative locations, routes, platforms, or organizational arrangements. Distributed operational concepts similarly emphasize dispersal, mobility, redundancy, alternative operating locations, and the separation of functions previously concentrated at major fixed installations (Alberts et al., 2000; U.S. Air Force, 2022; U.S. Marine Corps, 2023).

The result is a widening gap between the physical target map and the functional target map. A large installation may remain highly visible while losing operational centrality, whereas a smaller node may become more important by absorbing displaced functions. In networked systems, strategic effect depends increasingly on relationships, connectivity, and the functions sustained across the wider operational architecture rather than on individual platforms or facilities alone (Alberts et al., 2000).

Phase III would therefore begin with a different strategic question: **What remains strategically important after the largest and most visible targets have already been exposed?**

3. Residual Target Depletion

This brief defines **Residual Target Depletion (RTD)** as the progressive decline in the marginal strategic return from further disruption of previously exposed fixed targets as they are destroyed, disabled, evacuated, hardened, dispersed, substituted, or repeatedly attacked.

The central distinction is straightforward:

Target depletion is not target exhaustion.

Protracted conflict does not eliminate the target environment. It transforms it.

RTD concerns the marginal return from additional disruption rather than the simple number of targets that remain. A target may retain substantial strategic value while offering diminishing returns from further attack. Conversely, a previously secondary node may gain importance as the system becomes increasingly dependent on it. Research on interdependent networks and infrastructure recovery supports the broader proposition that system effects depend not only on the physical survival of individual nodes, but also on dependencies, recovery sequences, substitution, and changes in network functionality (Buldyrev et al., 2010; Hu et al., 2016).

A simplified conceptual representation is:

$$\boldsymbol{MR_{\mathrm{i}}(t) = V_{\mathrm{i}} \times F_{\mathrm{i}}(t) \times E_{\mathrm{i}}(t) \times A_{\mathrm{i}}(t)} \quad \textbf{(1)}$$

where $\mathbf{MR_i(t)}$ denotes the marginal strategic return from additional disruption of target *i* at time *t*; $\mathbf{V_i}$ denotes underlying strategic value; $\mathbf{F_i(t)}$ denotes current functional relevance; $\mathbf{E_i(t)}$ denotes meaningful operational exposure; and $\mathbf{A_i(t)}$ denotes the additional effect obtainable through further disruption.

The expression is heuristic rather than predictive. It illustrates interaction among the principal components of marginal strategic return rather than specifying an empirically estimated functional form.

For previously exposed targets under sustained RTD conditions, the expected direction of change is:

$$E[\Delta MR_i / \Delta t] < 0 \quad (2)$$

This does not imply a monotonic decline. Repair, reconcentration, renewed dependence, or failure of substitute systems may temporarily increase the marginal return from further disruption. Infrastructure-recovery research likewise demonstrates that restoration sequences and the recovery of particular connections can alter system functionality over time rather than producing a simple linear trajectory (Hu et al., 2016).

At the same time, the strategic value of alternative nodes may rise. This produces a broader transition:

Depletion → Dispersion → Functional Substitution → Target Migration

As the marginal return from attacking previously exposed assets declines, surviving capabilities disperse, alternative systems absorb displaced functions, and strategic attention shifts toward the networks that sustain residual operational continuity. The sequence is an original analytical framework developed in this brief; the broader underlying dynamics of interdependence, cascading effects, distributed operation, and recovery are consistent with existing network and operational literature (Alberts et al., 2000; Buldyrev et al., 2010; Hu et al., 2016; U.S. Air Force, 2022).

4. The Three-Phase Evolution of Target Logic

The U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict can be interpreted through three distinct target logics. These categories describe the dominant target logic of each phase rather than the full political or operational character of the phase itself.

Phase I centered on asset destruction. Visible and concentrated military, command, air-defense, surveillance, maritime, and energy infrastructure presented clear objects of coercive action. The dominant logic was to destroy what was visible and valuable, with strategic effect measured largely through physical degradation.

Phase II shifted toward recovery denial. Once major assets had been damaged, competition increasingly moved toward repair, replenishment, external support, logistics, alternative routes, network restoration, and force repositioning. The dominant target logic became the prevention of functional recovery, shifting competition from first-order destruction toward regeneration and reconstitution. The strategic importance of recovery sequencing, restoration priorities, mobility, and alternative operating arrangements is consistent with research on network recovery and distributed operational concepts (Hu et al., 2016; U.S. Air Force, 2022).

A possible **Phase III would center on functional disruption**. The dominant target logic would be to disrupt the functions that sustain the residual system, including sensing, communications, mobility, replenishment, repair, logistical continuity, maritime support, substitution, distributed command, and recovery. Large fixed assets would remain relevant, but they would no longer provide a complete map of strategic value. Network-centric and distributed operational concepts similarly emphasize connectivity, information flows, mobility, dispersed nodes, and sustainment as determinants of operational effectiveness (Alberts et al., 2000; U.S. Air Force, 2022, 2025; U.S. Marine Corps, 2023).

Table 1. Three-Phase Evolution of Target Logic

Phase	Primary Logic	Strategic Object
Phase I	Asset destruction	Visible high-value infrastructure
Phase II	Recovery denial	Reconstitution and regeneration
Phase III	Functional disruption	Residual operational continuity

Note: The three phases represent dominant target logics rather than mutually exclusive or formally designated stages of conflict. Multiple logics may coexist at any given time; the analytical question is which logic becomes predominant. The three-phase formulation is an original analytical framework developed in this brief.

Sources: Author's analysis, informed by Alberts et al. (2000), Hu et al. (2016), U.S. Air Force (2022, 2025), and U.S. Marine Corps (2023).

5. From Physical Scale to Functional Centrality

One implication of RTD is that physical scale becomes a less reliable indicator of strategic importance.

In early conflict:

$$\textit{Large Asset} \approx \textit{High Strategic Value}$$

In prolonged networked conflict:

$$\textit{Physical Size} \neq \textit{Operational Criticality}$$

A smaller node may become more important when other systems depend on it. Research on networked and interdependent systems demonstrates that the consequences of node disruption depend substantially on connectivity and dependency relationships rather than physical scale alone (Alberts et al., 2000; Buldyrev et al., 2010).

The more developed expression of Phase III target logic is therefore:

$$\textit{Late} - \textit{Phase Strategic Value} \propto \textit{Functional Centrality}$$

Strategic value increasingly depends on the function a node sustains rather than on its physical size alone. Within the RTD framework, this proposition builds on the broader emphasis in network literature on connectivity, dependency, and system functionality (Alberts et al., 2000; Buldyrev et al., 2010).

This produces a visibility paradox. As the conflict continues, its most consequential elements may become less visible. A major strike against a prominent installation may produce dramatic imagery but limited additional degradation if its primary functions have already migrated. Conversely, disruption of a smaller, high-dependency node with limited substitution capacity may generate greater system-level consequences. Interdependent-network research demonstrates how localized disruption can propagate beyond the initially affected component when other systems depend on its continued function (Buldyrev et al., 2010).

The implication is not that visible assets cease to matter. It is that visibility and strategic importance increasingly diverge as the conflict matures.

6. The Likely Character of a Phase III Conflict

A third phase would likely differ from Phase I in four respects.

6.1 More Distributed

Months of adaptation have dispersed functions across mobile platforms, temporary locations, partner networks, and substitute routes. Disabling one facility may therefore no longer eliminate the function it once housed. Contemporary distributed operational concepts explicitly emphasize dispersed locations, mobility, redundancy, contingency locations, and the ability to continue generating operational effects under threat (U.S. Air Force, 2022; U.S. Marine Corps, 2023).

The key question becomes: How much redundancy remains?

6.2 More Function-Oriented

The conflict would increasingly center on whether actors can continue to see, communicate, move, repair, replenish, coordinate, protect flows, and sustain operational tempo. Effectiveness would depend less on individual platforms than on the integrity of interconnected systems. This emphasis on information, connectivity, distributed command, sustainment, and integrated operational effects is consistent with network-centric and contemporary distributed-operations doctrine (Alberts et al., 2000; U.S. Air Force, 2022, 2025; U.S. Marine Corps, 2023).

6.3 More Maritime

The renewed escalation again highlights the Strait of Hormuz. Ships, ports, insurers, crews, routing systems, escorts, energy flows, communications, and naval forces operate within an interconnected environment. The July 2026 commercial-shipping attacks, subsequent U.S. strikes, tanker reversals, and renewed market disruption illustrate how localized maritime violence can propagate across military, commercial, logistical, and economic systems (Reuters, 2026b, 2026c, 2026d; U.S. Central Command, 2026).

A maritime-centered Phase III would therefore increase third-party exposure even if the core military confrontation remained concentrated along the U.S.–Iran axis.

6.4 More Ambiguous

As functions disperse, military operations may rely more heavily on commercial transport, dual-use communications, civilian infrastructure, private maintenance, contracted logistics, partner-state access, and temporary facilities. Distributed operational concepts themselves recognize growing dependence on mobility, expeditionary logistics, dispersed support arrangements, and networks extending beyond traditional major bases (U.S. Air Force, 2022; U.S. Marine Corps, 2023).

This does not make such systems legitimate targets by default. It does, however, widen the zone of ambiguity and increase the risk of miscalculation, unintended escalation, and third-party exposure.

Because the renewed U.S.–Iran direct exchange is the principal source of current phase-transition risk, the table below focuses on strategic exposure along that escalation axis rather than the entire U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict system.

The pattern is consistent with RTD. Functions associated with repeatedly exposed major bases and severely degraded energy infrastructure may retain political or strategic importance while offering declining marginal returns from further disruption. By contrast, maritime support, sensing, distributed basing, aviation sustainment, and logistical continuity may become relatively more important because they sustain residual operational functionality after the original architecture has been degraded (Alberts et al., 2000; U.S. Air Force, 2022, 2025; U.S. Marine Corps, 2023).

Table 2. Functional Areas of Strategic Pressure Along the U.S.–Iran Escalation Axis in a Possible Phase III

Functional Exposure Category	Likelihood of Becoming More Central	Strategic Significance
Maritime operational support	Very High	Very High
ISR and early-warning continuity	Very High	Very High
Distributed operational basing	High	Very High
Aviation sustainment	High	Very High
Alternative export-route and logistics continuity	High	Very High
Energy recovery	Medium–High	High
Private-sector operational support	Medium–High	High
Digital and network continuity	Medium–High	High
Repeatedly exposed major-base functions	Medium	Medium
Severely degraded energy functions	Low–Medium	Low

Note: The table assesses strategic exposure, not targeting probability. Ratings are qualitative and comparative rather than probabilistic. They reflect the author's assessment of four factors: residual functional importance, system dependence, substitution capacity, and the extent to which earlier conflict has already reduced the marginal strategic return from further disruption. "Likelihood of Becoming More Central" refers to the expected direction of relative functional importance as the conflict evolves, whereas "Strategic Significance" refers to the potential system-level consequences associated with disruption of that function. No additive weighting, numerical scoring, or predictive probability is implied. The table focuses on the U.S.–Iran escalation axis because the renewed direct exchange is the principal source of current phase-transition risk.

Sources: Author's assessment based on the RTD framework developed in this brief, informed by Alberts et al. (2000), Buldyrev et al. (2010), Reuters (2026b, 2026c, 2026d), U.S. Air Force (2022, 2025), U.S. Central Command (2026), and U.S. Marine Corps (2023).

The central implication is not that large fixed assets cease to matter. It is that their relative importance changes as the conflict matures and strategic exposure shifts toward the functions required to sustain operational continuity.

7. Policy Implications

Distinguish Escalation from Phase Transition

A large strike can remain part of an existing conflict structure. Policymakers should focus on persistence, target logic, and changes in operational behavior rather than strike intensity alone.

Monitor Functions, Redundancy, and Substitution

Battle damage assessments should track whether affected capabilities have been restored, dispersed, substituted, or transferred elsewhere. System vulnerability depends not only on the assets lost, but also on the number and quality of functional alternatives that remain.

Anticipate Wider Civilian and Third-Party Exposure

As military operations rely more heavily on commercial, maritime, digital, and partner-state systems, functional disruption can spread conflict effects beyond the principal belligerents.

Preserve Deconfliction and Measure System Degradation

A more dispersed and ambiguous operating environment increases the importance of communication even as political trust declines. Physical damage and functional decline should be assessed separately, because visible destruction may not accurately reflect actual system performance.

8. Limitations

This brief relies on publicly available reporting and cannot independently verify all battlefield claims, damage assessments, or changes in operational posture. Some reported events may remain incomplete, contested, or subject to subsequent revision.

The assessment of a Phase II–III transition is provisional and depends on whether current escalation persists beyond the present analytical window. Phase labels are analytical constructs rather than official military designations.

RTD is a conceptual framework, not a predictive targeting model. It identifies how the marginal strategic return from further disruption may decline as assets are damaged, dispersed, hardened, substituted, or repeatedly exposed. It does not estimate the exact utility of individual facilities, provide a predictive ranking of future attacks, or substitute for empirical battle-damage and network-performance analysis.

The qualitative ratings in **Table 2** are comparative analytical judgments rather than probabilities or forecasts. They are intended to illustrate how relative strategic exposure may shift along the U.S.–Iran escalation axis as the broader conflict matures.

Conclusion

The U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict may be entering Phase III, but the threshold has not yet been conclusively crossed. Renewed attacks on commercial shipping, new U.S. strikes inside Iran, Iranian retaliatory strikes targeting U.S. military sites in Bahrain and Kuwait, and the erosion of the interim accord have created a credible phase-transition risk along the U.S.–Iran axis.

Yet a new phase should not be defined by intensity alone. The deeper question is whether the logic of the conflict is changing.

After two phases of conflict, the target environment is no longer the same. Many visible high-value assets have been damaged, evacuated, hardened, dispersed, repeatedly exposed, or functionally substituted. This is the significance of **Residual Target Depletion**: protracted conflict can reduce the marginal strategic return from further disruption of previously exposed targets before the broader target environment is exhausted.

As that process advances, strategic competition shifts from assets toward functions.

Phase I asked: What can be destroyed?

Phase II asked: What can recover?

A genuine Phase III would increasingly ask: What still keeps the system working?

That is the threshold to watch.

If Phase III emerges, it is unlikely to be marked simply by larger strikes or a longer target list. Its defining feature would instead be growing competition over the residual functions that sustain operational continuity.

Phase III, in that sense, would be less a replay of the opening phase than a structurally different form of conflict.

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