

# BRITAIN AT WAR?

Adam Irwin warns the UK risks being drawn into a preventive war it did not choose

**B**ritain is exposed to the consequences of a preventive war it neither initiated nor debated. In our report *Iran: The Strikes, the Stakes and Britain's Exposure*, we argue that the decapitation strike on Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has not resolved the Iran question but accelerated escalation under conditions the coalition may struggle to sustain.

The killing of Khamenei, alongside several senior Iranian military figures, represents one of the most significant decapitation operations in modern interstate conflict. The symbolic scale of the strike obscures a harder strategic reality: Iran's coercive core – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its command infrastructure – remains intact. Eliminating the Supreme Leader does not equate to eliminating the regime, the IRGC remains the regime. The assumption that decapitation produces collapse has been tested before and history is not reassuring. The deeper concern is that the strikes occurred as diplomacy was nearing breakthrough. Mediators had reported significant Iranian concessions in the days before the operation, including proposals around enriched uranium stockpiling under full IAEA verification.

When military action overtakes diplomatic momentum, you are not resolving a crisis you are redefining it. The perception that a breakthrough was close makes the escalation strategically consequential, not just tactically dramatic. Iran's retaliation was immediate and expansive. Ballistic missile strikes targeted Israeli territory and US facilities across the Gulf, while the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz has shifted the centre of gravity from battlefield dynamics to global economic disruption.

A fifth of the world's oil moves through Hormuz. When insurers withdraw cover and shipping reroutes, the theatre stops being regional. It becomes systemic. Energy, insurance, freight and inflation are now part of the battlespace. For Britain, the implications are immediate. The UK imported over 40 percent of its energy in 2024, with domestic production in decline. A sustained oil price spike feeds directly into household energy bills, transport costs and inflationary pressure at a moment of economic fragility.

Energy dependency, fragile growth and tight fiscal space mean external shocks transmit quickly. What begins as a strike package in the Middle East becomes a UK cost-of-living problem within weeks. Military exposure has also shifted rapidly. Britain initially stated it "did not participate" in the strikes. Within hours, British aircraft were conducting coordinated regional defensive operations. Days later, an Iranian drone struck RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus – the first direct hit on a British military installation since the conflict began.

The distinction between participation and exposure has now collapsed. British assets are in theatre.



Geography determines vulnerability more than political intent. It's important to understand the structural asymmetry shaping the conflict. Iran's threshold for success is survival. The coalition's objectives – regime change, destruction of nuclear capability and elimination of missile capacity without ground deployment – are significantly higher.

When one side needs only to endure and the other needs to transform the strategic landscape, sustainability becomes decisive. Interceptor stockpiles, logistics depth and political cohesion matter as much as airpower. The legal and intelligence context further complicates Britain's position. Western intelligence agencies had assessed that Iran was not actively building a nuclear weapon at the time of the strikes. If this is categorised as preventive rather than pre-emptive action, the legal foundation becomes contested. That question does not stop at Washington. It extends to any state that provides operational support.

Britain reportedly resisted direct participation before agreeing to open key bases for strike operations and this is how entanglement happens. Not through dramatic declarations, but through incremental operational alignment during escalation. By the time assets are struck, the argument over whether you are involved has already been settled by events. While both sides may now seek diplomatic off-ramps, including transitional leadership arrangements in Tehran, second-order economic effects may outlast immediate military exchanges. Britain is exposed. It has limited influence over escalation dynamics, yet it bears tangible economic and military risk. The central question is no longer whether Britain is involved, but how deeply that involvement may run ●

**A Wildcat lifts off from a British base in Cyprus**

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