

Beat: Politics

HOW “ROARING LION” AND “EPIC FURY” ARE RESHAPING THE MIDDLE EAST&TESTING FRANCE

3 WEEKS OF WAR, AND NO END IN SIGHT

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USPA NEWS - Almost three weeks after the launch of Israel's Operation Roaring Lion against Iran and the United States' massive Epic Fury campaign, what many leaders initially framed as a short, sharp operation is turning into a grinding regional war. In his 1 March address, President Donald Trump described Epic Fury as “one of the most important, complex and impressive military offensives the world has ever seen” and announced that US and allied forces had struck “hundreds of targets” in Iran, including Revolutionary Guard facilities and air defence systems, and destroyed “nine ships, as well as their shipyard” within minutes. He also declared that former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was dead and urged Iran's military and Revolutionary Guards to lay down their arms and “benefit from full immunity, or face certain death”. At the National Defence and Security Council on 17 March, Emmanuel Macron stressed that “France did not choose this war” and “is not party to this conflict”, defining a purely defensive posture centred on three objectives: protecting French citizens and assets, standing by partners against terrorism and instability, and safeguarding maritime security.

This editorial is written by our accredited senior geopolitical correspondent and is based on information released by official national and international institutions. This is not a report on site, and it combines her long standing expertise, data driven insights and intellectual intuition to offer a personal reading of the international and political significance of these developments.

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Almost three weeks after the launch of Israel's Operation Roaring Lion against Iran and the United States' massive Epic Fury campaign, what many leaders initially framed as a short, sharp operation is turning into a grinding regional war. In his 1 March address, President Donald Trump described Epic Fury as “one of the most important, complex and impressive military offensives the world has ever seen” and announced that US and allied forces had struck “hundreds of targets” in Iran, including Revolutionary Guard facilities and air defence systems, and destroyed “nine ships, as well as their shipyard” within minutes. He also declared that former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was dead and urged Iran's military and Revolutionary Guards to lay down their arms and “benefit from full immunity, or face certain death”. Behind this triumphalist language, however, the campaign has not broken Tehran's ability to respond: Iranian backed groups continue to fire rockets and drones across the region, and the conflict is now spreading well beyond Iran's borders.

A REGION ON FIRE: LEBANON, HEZBOLLAH AND THE “AXIS OF RESISTANCE”

Lebanon illustrates how quickly the war is destabilising neighbouring countries. According to figures collected by the Lebanese authorities and shared by UNHCR on 10 March, more than 667 000 people have registered as displaced within just over a week, after Israeli evacuation orders covering more than 50 villages and dense urban areas in the south were followed by intensified air strikes. Around 120 000 people are now staying in collective shelters designated by the government, while many others are crowding into the homes of relatives or still searching for somewhere to live, often for the second time since the 2024 hostilities. UNHCR warns that “fear, uncertainty and repeated trauma” are widespread, that thousands of people including over 78 000 Syrians and more than 7 700 Lebanese, have already crossed into Syria, and that its operation in Lebanon is only around 14% funded, forcing it to appeal for urgent international solidarity.

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Militarily, Hezbollah has moved from cautious deterrence to open confrontation. In the days following Khamenei's killing in a joint US Israeli air campaign, the group claimed responsibility for rocket barrages against northern Israel explicitly linked to the assassination, prompting large scale Israeli air raids on Beirut's southern suburbs and the Bekaa Valley. Analysts quoted by Al Jazeera see Hezbollah's decision less as an act of pure solidarity with Tehran than as an attempt to pre-empt a full scale Israeli offensive at a time when the “axis of resistance” looks increasingly fragmented, its land bridge through Syria cut and many of its commanders killed. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, interviewed by Al Jazeera Arabic, insisted that “we can defend ourselves by ourselves” and that Tehran does not need its proxies to fight its battles, but the reality on the ground is messier: Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis

in Yemen now seem to be fighting simultaneous wars of regime survival and regional influence, with civilians paying the highest price.

FRANCE'S LINE: CONDEMN IRAN, AVOID BECOMING A BELLIGERENT

In this rapidly deteriorating environment, France is trying to walk a narrow line between firmness and non belligerence. In a joint statement with Germany, Italy, Japan, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom, Paris "condemns in the strongest terms" Iran's attacks on unarmed commercial shipping, strikes on oil and gas facilities and the de facto closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and demands that Tehran halt mine laying, drone and missile strikes and comply with UN Security Council Resolution 2817 and the principle of freedom of navigation.

At the National Defence and Security Council on 17 March, French President Macron stressed that "France did not choose this war" and "is not party to this conflict", defining a purely defensive posture centred on three objectives: protecting French citizens and assets, standing by partners against terrorism and instability, and safeguarding maritime security. On Hormuz, he drew a red line: "France will never take part in operations to open or liberate the Strait of Hormuz in the current context", but once the bombardments have subsided, Paris is ready "with other nations" to organise naval escorts for commercial vessels, provided there is prior "de confliction" with Iran and a clear separation from ongoing war fighting. In other words, as the third week of fighting begins and more actors are sucked into the confrontation, France is seeking to punish Iranian aggression and support its allies without crossing the threshold that would make it a full fledged party to a conflict that increasingly risks spilling over into something much larger.

As the crisis deepens, what remains to be seen is whether the states involved will turn this moment into an opportunity for genuine diplomacy, or slide further into an escalation whose consequences would reach far beyond the region.... Sources: French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Presidency, UNHCR, AL Jazeera TVTo be continued

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