

EXTERNAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE

Global Affairs · Security & Defence · EU Perspective

2026

GLOBAL AFFAIRS · SECURITY & DEFENCE · ANALYSIS

The Iran War: A European Reckoning

How a war Europe didn't start, wasn't told about, and couldn't stop has exposed the continent's deepest strategic failures.

AUTHOR

Lorenzo G. Sallemi

Director, External Affairs Institute

DATE

March 2026

Based on reporting as of 4 March 2026. Conflict ongoing.

T H E B R I E F

In the early hours of Saturday, 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury — killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei within hours and plunging the Middle East into open war. Europe woke up to a conflict it had not been consulted about, had no plan for, and was already paying the price of.

The legal basis for the strikes collapsed almost immediately under scrutiny. The Senate Intelligence Committee's ranking Democrat stated publicly there was no evidence of an imminent Iranian attack. The administration offered three different justifications in the space of 24 hours: Trump cited self-defence; Rubio admitted the US struck pre-emptively because Israel was going to act anyway; Hegseth called Iran's missile arsenal a "shield for nuclear blackmail." The incoherence was familiar. So was the silence that followed from Brussels.

K E Y F A C T S

28 Feb 2026 — Operation Epic Fury launched by US and Israel
Strait of Hormuz closed — ~20% of world oil and LNG flows through it
RAF Akrotiri (Cyprus, EU territory) struck by Iranian Shahed drones
Article 42.7 TEU — EU mutual defence clause — was not invoked
Greece responded bilaterally: two frigates, four F-16s, anti-drone systems
France announced nuclear doctrine update and "advanced deterrence" framework
Turkey: only NATO member to condemn the strikes as illegal

The Economic Wound

Europe's first and most concrete injury was economic — and entirely self-inflicted.

After 2022, EU member states had congratulated themselves on reducing dependence on Russian gas by pivoting to Gulf LNG — Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia. It was called strategic diversification. Then Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz, through which approximately 20% of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas passes. Maersk and Hapag-Lloyd suspended all operations. Iranian missiles struck energy infrastructure in Qatar and Saudi Arabia in the opening days of retaliation.

European gas prices spiked. Governments that had just managed one energy crisis were staring down another — this time with no one else to blame. The pivot away from Russia had simply traded one fragile dependency for a more explosive one. Strategic diversification, it turned out, is only as good as the stability of the region you diversify into.

"The pivot away from Russia simply traded one fragile dependency for a more explosive one."

EU Territory Was Attacked. The EU Said Nothing.

Then came the moment that should have changed everything — and didn't.

Iranian Shahed drones struck RAF Akrotiri on the island of Cyprus. Paphos airport was evacuated. An IRGC commander threatened missiles "with such intensity that the Americans will be forced to leave." Cyprus is a European Union member state. EU territory was under attack. Article 42.7 of the EU Treaty requires member states to aid a fellow member "by all means in their power."

Brussels issued a statement calling the situation "greatly concerning." It urged de-escalation.

What actually defended Cyprus was not the EU. It was Greece — acting bilaterally and with striking speed, dispatching two frigates, four F-16s, and anti-drone systems, with the Defence Minister flying personally to Nicosia. France sent the frigate Languedoc. The contrast was not subtle: two member states chose to act while the institution they belong to monitored developments.

"Two member states chose to act. The institution they belong to monitored developments."

No collective defence mechanism was invoked. No legal opinion was issued on the legitimacy of the strikes, despite the European Council on Foreign Relations describing the war plainly as "illegal." NATO Secretary General Rutte declared Europe "supportive" of the US action — a statement made without any EU mandate and contradicting the position of at least two member states.

A Continent Without a Position

The national responses of Europe's major powers revealed a continent with no shared instinct for crisis — and no mechanism to find one.

The United Kingdom

No longer an EU member but still a European power, the UK found itself in an almost comic middle ground — close enough to Washington to be a target for Iranian retaliation, distant enough from the operation to have no influence over its conduct, and too politically wounded by memories of Iraq to commit openly. Prime Minister Starmer initially refused to allow US use of British bases, then partially reversed course, satisfying nobody.

Germany

Chancellor Merz arrived at the White House as the first foreign leader to meet Trump after the strikes began, told him they were "on the same page" about Tehran, and confirmed German logistical support via Ramstein Air Base. Trump praised Germany and in the same breath threatened Spain. The implicit deal — German operational support in exchange for US protection of German trade interests — was visible to everyone.

Italy

Italy had positioned itself as Trump's closest EU ally. It was not informed before the attack. Foreign Minister Tajani confirmed this publicly. Defence Minister Crosetto was sheltering in a bunker in Dubai when the missiles fell, having travelled there privately as the war began. The government that had invested most heavily in the Washington relationship was treated as an afterthought when the actual decisions were made.

Spain

Spain alone took a principled stand — refusing to allow US forces use of its territory and explicitly citing international law. Trump declared he would halt all dealings with Madrid. The EU Commission said nothing in Spain's defence. Merz told Trump — correctly — that Spain could not be excluded from EU trade arrangements. But Germany had already provided the operational support that gave Washington the leverage to make the threat in the first place.

France

France's response was more strategically ambitious. Days into the war, Macron announced the most significant update to French nuclear doctrine in a generation: an increase in warhead stockpile, and for the first time, the possibility of deploying nuclear-armed Rafale aircraft to allied European nations under a new "advanced deterrence" framework. Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Sweden, Denmark and others joined.

It was presented as the birth of European strategic autonomy. It was also, more precisely, France offering to become Europe's nuclear patron — with French weapons, French aircraft, and the French finger on the trigger. Whether European partners have fully absorbed the asymmetry of that arrangement remains an open question.

Turkey

The most significant dissenting voice within NATO came not from any EU member state, but from Turkey. President Erdoğan was the only NATO leader to unambiguously condemn the strikes as illegal, deny American requests to use Turkish airspace and bases, and express condolences at the death of Khamenei. Ankara had been part of last-minute diplomatic efforts to broker a deal that Tehran had indicated willingness to sign — a comprehensive non-proliferation agreement that was on the table three days before the bombs fell.

Turkey's refusal to participate put it in remarkable isolation within the alliance. The backdrop matters: Israel has increasingly described Turkey as the next existential threat in the region. Erdoğan read the logic of the Iran war — remove a regime, reshape a region — and understood that the same logic has a Turkish address on the envelope.

What the EU's Silence Actually Means

The EU's institutional response amounted to careful irrelevance. Foreign ministers warned of "unpredictable economic consequences." The Commission called for the Strait of Hormuz to be kept open.

What this war has exposed is not a new vulnerability but an old one that was never fixed. Europe has spent decades building institutions designed to manage integration and economic convergence, while quietly hoping that the hardest questions — energy security, collective defence, strategic sovereignty — would never arrive all at once. They have now arrived simultaneously, in the same week, dressed as a war nobody wanted.

Greece sent frigates. France is selling a nuclear umbrella. Spain is being punished for following international law. Italy was not told. And the EU Commission issued a statement urging all sides to exercise restraint.

The bill for two decades of strategic complacency has come due. Europe is paying it in energy prices, in diplomatic humiliation, and in the slow realisation that when its territory is attacked, its institutions will monitor the situation while its member states decide individually whether to act.

"When EU territory was attacked, the institutions monitored. The member states decided. That is not a foreign policy. It is its absence."

THE BOTTOM LINE

Europe did not start this war. It was not consulted before it began. It has no mechanism to end it.

That is the diagnosis. The deeper question — the one that will define the next decade of European politics — is whether this moment produces real change or just another round of summits, statements, and strategic reviews that gather dust.

The Iran war has made one thing impossible to ignore: the EU's foreign policy architecture was built for a world that no longer exists. Reforming it requires not just new institutions or new spending, but a fundamental decision about what kind of power Europe wants to be — and what it is willing to do when the answer is tested.

Based on reporting from 4 March 2026. The conflict is ongoing and details continue to evolve.

About the External Affairs Institute

The External Affairs Institute is an independent think tank covering global affairs, security and defence, and EU policy — always from a European perspective. Founded and directed by Lorenzo G. Sallemi.

Views expressed are those of the author. May be reproduced with attribution. © External Affairs Institute, March 2026.