ديناميكيات التصعيد في مثلث إيران – أمريكا – إسرائيل: إطار افتراضي للمواجهة غير التقليدية وغير المتماثلة

الدكتور شوكر أبو بكر عزيز

قسم العلوم السياسية والعلاقات الدولية، كلية الحقوق والعلوم السياسية والإدارة، جامعة سوران، مدينة سوران، إقليم كردستان، العراق.

البريد الإلكتروني Email : Shoker.abobeker@soran.edu.iq

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Escalation Dynamics in the Iran–U.S.–Israel Triangle: A Hypothetical Framework for Conventional and Asymmetric Confrontation

Dr. Shoker Abobeker Aziz
Department of Politics and International Relations, Faculty of Law, Political Science and Management, Soran University, Soran City, Kurdistan Region, Iraq.

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الملخص:

يستكشف هذه الدراسة بشكل منهجي سيناريوهات الصراع العسكري الافتراضي بين جمهورية إيران الإسلامية وتحالف الولايات المتحدة وإسرائيل. تستخدم الدراسة دراسات الاستراتيجية، وحسابات التوازن العسكري، ونظرية الردع، والجيوبوليتيكا الإقليمية، والنظائر التاريخية لتحديد خمسة سيناريوهات رئيسية للصراع: ضربة إسرائيلية محدودة على المنشآت النووية الإيرانية؛ حملة جوية واسعة بقيادة أمريكية؛ تصعيد إيراني غير متماثل وعبر الوكلاء؛ حرب شاملة الطيف بسبب سوء التقدير؛ ونزع تصعيد تفاوضي. في كل سيناريو من هذه السيناريوهات، يتم فحص دور الجهات غير الحكومية، وديناميكيات العمليات، ومسارات التصعيد، وآثار الامتداد الإقليمي، والظروف التي تؤدي إلى نشوبها. يأخذ البحث في الاعتبار القيود الجغرافية التي تفرضها إيران، والبنية التحتية الإيرانية المتعددة الطبقات لمنع الوصول/حرمان المنطقة، والعمق الاستراتيجي

الذي توفره شبكة وكلائها، والاقتصاد السياسي المحلي لجميع اللاعبين الرئيسيين. ويختتم المقال بالتأكيد على أهمية قنوات اتصال الأزمات والمخارج الدبلوماسية حتى في مواجهة العداء الخصم الشرس، مشيراً إلى أن الحل العسكري السريع والواضح لا يزال غير مرجح من الناحية الهيكلية، ولكن أخطر طريق يبقى هو التصعيد غير المقصود عبر سوء التقدير، أو فشل الاستخبارات، أو تشابكات الوكلاء.

Abstract:
This article systematically explores the scenarios of a hypothetical military conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and a coalition of the United States and Israel. The study uses strategic studies, military balance calculations, deterrence theory, regional geopolitics and historical analogues to identify five major conflict scenarios: limited Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities; extensive U.S.-led air campaign; Iranian asymmetric and proxy escalation; full-spectrum war due to miscalculation; and negotiated de-escalation. In each of the scenarios, the role of non-state actors, the dynamics of operations, escalation paths, regional spillover effects and the circumstances that trigger them are examined. The research takes into account the geographical constraints imposed by Iran, Iran's layered anti-access/area denial infrastructure, the strategic depth provided by its proxy network, and the domestic political economy of all key players. The article concludes by emphasising the importance of crisis communication channels and diplomatic off-ramps even in the face of virulent adversarial animosity, noting that a clear, fast military solution remains structurally unlikely, but that the most dangerous path remains that of inadvertent escalation via miscalculation, intelligence failure, or proxy entanglements.

1Introduction

The triangle war between the United States, Israel, and the Islamic Republic of Iran has the structural complexity, ideological depth and potential for escalation, of few dyadic confrontations in the contemporary international order. Iran has pursued a grand strategy rooted in resistance to American hegemony, the destruction of the Israeli state as a normative and political goal, and the development of a networked sphere of influence from Tehran to Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Sanaa, and Gaza since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 radically changed the balance of power in the Middle East. Iranian theorists usually call it the "Axis of Resistance" or the forward defence theory. But it's more than a simple reactionary tactic. Regional hegemony is a reasonable, though unbalanced, goal.

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The U.S. has strategic and treaty obligations to Israel that have been described as unbreakable by successive administrations, and sees Iran's nuclear ambitions, ballistic missile programs and proxy warfighting capabilities as existential threats to the regional order and American credibility. Israel has a long-standing policy of preventive military action to pre-empt the emergence of nuclear competitors, including the 1981 bombing of Iraq's Osirak reactor and the 2007 strike against a Syrian nuclear facility. Israel's unacknowledged nuclear capability and conventional military superiority over its regional foes.

The academic literature about this triangle problem is filled with many theoretical traditions. Realist perspectives highlight the factors of security dilemma dynamics, pressures of power transition, and calculations of the balance of threat that underlie the strategic behaviour of each actor (Walt, 1987; Mearsheimer, 2001; Posen, 2013). Constructivist accounts emphasise the importance of identity, revolutionary ideology and historical memory, especially Iran's experience of the 1953 CIA-engineered coup and the 1980-1988 war with Iraq, in shaping Iranian strategic culture and Tehran's perception of American and Israeli intent (Takeyh, 2006; Adib-Moghaddam, 2008). Negotiated agreements, as demonstrated by the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the contentious events that followed, can constrain Iran's nuclear ambitions, according to liberal institutionalists (Fitzpatrick, 2015; Kerr, 2021).

Rather than adjudicate between these competing theoretical frameworks, this article uses scenario analysis, a method with deep roots in Cold War strategic planning and increasingly applied to contemporary regional conflict forecasting (Kahn, 1960; Schelling, 1966; Doran, 2019), to map the probable contours of a hypothetical military confrontation. The five scenarios considered are not mutually exclusive, but rather represent different points along an escalatory continuum, and the article focuses on the dynamics that could push the conflict from one scenario to another. The analysis starts with an assessment of the structural context, followed by a detailed assessment of the scenarios, followed by a cross-cutting analysis of escalation dynamics, and ends with a final reflection on the implications for deterrence stability and diplomatic management. It draws on open source military assessments, think tank analysis, historical analogues and the academic literature on deterrence, coercion and asymmetric conflict to produce analytically rigorous, empirically grounded scenario assessments. While recognising the inevitable limitations of predictive scenario analysis, especially on individual decision-making, intelligence failure and stochastic events, it is argued

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that structured scenario analysis nonetheless offers an important analytical advantage in understanding the risk environment of this critically important dyadic conflict.

1.1 The Problem Statement

The adversarial triangle of the United States, Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran constitutes one of the most structurally volatile and analytically complex security dysfunctions of the contemporary international order. Even after decades of deterrence management, sanctions pressure, covert operations and intermittent diplomacy, the basic drivers of conflict—Iran's nuclear ambitions, its expansive proxy network, Israel's doctrine of preventive military action and American commitments to regional order—remain unsettled. The main question this article seeks to answer is why there is no systematic, scenario-based analytical framework to chart the likely contours of a hypothetical military confrontation between Iran on one side and the United States and Israel on the other, taking into account the dynamics of escalation, proxy entanglement, nuclear thresholds, and the structural constraints of domestic politics and regional spillover. But absent such a framework, policymakers and scholars lack the analytical tools to differentiate between manageable limited exchanges and pathways toward catastrophic inadvertent escalation.

1.2 The Significance of the Study

The importance of this study has both theoretical and policy-relevant. The Iran–U.S.–Israel triangle is, in theory, a "complex deterrence" environment that is not adequately explained by classical deterrence theory, compellence models, or rational actor models. The presence of non-state proxy actors with autonomous agency, nuclear asymmetry between the parties, and the interplay of revolutionary ideology with pragmatic statecraft create an analytical environment that existing scholarship has only partially addressed. Empirically, the collapse of the JCPOA post-2019, Iran's rapid nuclear advances, and the unprecedented April 2024 direct Iranian ballistic missile and drone attack on Israeli territory have materially altered the strategic landscape in ways that demand systematic reassessment. At the policy level, the stakes are far larger than the immediate belligerents. A military confrontation involving Iranian closure of the Strait of Hormuz, activation of its proxy network across multiple theatres, and the spectre of nuclear escalation would impose systemic shocks on global energy markets, regional state stability and the international non-proliferation regime.

1.3 The Aims of the Study

The article has three related aims. First, it tries to conduct a systematic

scenario analysis of a hypothetical military confrontation between Iran and the U.S.–Israel coalition and to develop five main scenarios ranging from a limited Israeli preventive strike to negotiated de-escalation. Second, it aims to analyse the cross-cutting escalation dynamics – including proxy actor autonomy, nuclear thresholds, regional spillover, and domestic political constraints – that shape what scenarios are most likely and what conditions lead a conflict from one trajectory to another. Third, it hopes to identify the theoretical and policy implications of the analysis for deterrence stability, crisis communication, and diplomatic management in a region that still suffers from critically underdeveloped formal crisis management infrastructure.

1.4 Research Questions

The article is structured around three main research questions and three sub-questions that operationalise the scenario analysis framework.
Key Research Questions:
The most likely scenarios for a hypothetical military clash between Iran and the U.S.-Israeli coalition and the specific trigger mechanisms, operational dynamics and escalation thresholds for each.
What would lead a limited military exchange (e.g., an Israeli strike on nuclear facilities) to escalate to full-spectrum regional war? What is the role of miscalculation, intelligence failure, proxy entanglement, and the breakdown of crisis communications in this escalation?
To what extent can classical deterrence theory explain the strategic behaviour of Iran, the United States and Israel in this triangular relationship and what structural conditions would permit negotiated de-escalation notwithstanding four decades of deep adversarial hostility?
Subordinate research questions:
To what extent does the autonomous decision making capacity of non-state proxy actors shape escalation dynamics, and what mechanisms exist – or could be developed – to manage proxy generated escalation risk?
When, if ever, would Iran seek nuclear breakout or Israel consider nuclear use, and what crisis management mechanisms would be required to prevent nuclear escalation in a conventional conflict?
What are the likely regional spillover effects (humanitarian, economic, political) of different conflict scenarios and how would third-party actors react to or influence these outcomes?

1.5 Method and Data of the Study

This article uses scenario analysis as its main methodological approach, a method long embedded in Cold War strategic planning and more recently used to project regional conflict in the present age (Kahn, 1960; Schelling, 1966; Doran, 2019). Scenario analysis plots likely outlines of a

possible conflict rather than choosing between alternative theories. By systematically varying key structural variables — military capabilities, triggers for escalation, proxy dynamics, and third-party interventions — scenario analysis produces a structured set of plausible outcomes. The analysis uses open source military assessments, think tank and policy institute publications, declassified government and congressional materials, IAEA and IISS reports, and the academic literature on deterrence, coercion, asymmetric conflict, and crisis management. The scenario analysis is based on empirically established patterns of escalation and de-escalation using historical analogues including the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Operation Desert Storm and the 2015 JCPOA negotiations. The study acknowledges the intrinsic limitations of predictive scenario analysis particularly as it pertains to individual leadership psychology, intelligence failure and stochastic events. Its conclusions are offered with appropriate epistemic modesty.

1.6 Structure of the Article

The remainder of this article proceeds through eight sections organized to build analytical complexity progressively while maintaining clear linkages to the research questions and scenario framework. Section 2 assesses the military capabilities and strategic doctrines of the three main players—Iran, Israel, and the United States—providing the structural basis for the scenario analysis. The third section provides a detailed description of each of the five scenarios, their operational dynamics, escalation pathways, proxy roles and probable outcomes. Section 4 offers a cross-cutting analysis of escalation and stabilising dynamics, including the roles of regional and external powers, domestic political constraints, and nuclear escalation thresholds. Section 5 systematically evaluates key uncertainties and likely results across the scenario space. The theoretical implications of the analysis for deterrence theory and the bargaining model of war are discussed in Section 6. Section 7 highlights the key policy implications for crisis management and strategic planning. Section 8 concludes by situating the findings within the broader challenge of constructing crisis stability structures in a region that has not yet developed the institutional infrastructure that the Cold War took decades to build.

2. Structural Context: Military Capabilities and Strategic Asymmetries

2.1 Iranian Doctrine and Military Capabilities

The Iranian military power is organisationally focused on the Islamic

Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), supported by the conventional military forces, the Artesh, and the paramilitary militia, the Basij. Since the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian strategic doctrine has undergone a significant transformation to include what Iranian strategists refer to as a "mosaic defense" which integrates conventional deterrence with ballistic missile forces, asymmetric denial through naval mine warfare and maritime harassment in the Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, activation of proxy networks as a second-strike capability, and cyber operations as a domain of persistent engagement below the threshold of kinetic warfare (Guzansky & Berti, 2014; Cronin, 2019).

Iran's ballistic missile arsenal is arguably its most critical conventional deterrent. The Aerospace Force of the IRGC is believed to have more than 3,000 ballistic missiles, including the Shahab-3 (1,300 km), Emad (1,700 km), Khorramshahr (2,000 km) and the hypersonic Fattah, which is reported to be able to fly at Mach 13–15 and to evade existing missile defence systems (IISS, 2024). Iran has also developed an expanding and complex unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) capacity, used with lethal impact in the January 2024 Tower 22 strike in Jordan and the April 2024 direct assault on Israeli territory, a historically unprecedented event with the use of some 170 drones, 120 ballistic missiles, and 30 cruise missiles (ISW, 2024).

This "forward defence" perimeter is a strategic multiplier of great importance, and the IRGC Quds Force commanders call it Iran's proxy network. Hezbollah in Lebanon has an estimated 100,000–150,000 rockets and missiles with varying degrees of accuracy and range, including the Fateh-110 and Zelzal series, capable of hitting Tel Aviv and strategic Israeli infrastructure (Levitt, 2022). That network of non-state partners – Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza, the Houthi movement in Yemen and the Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) – can inflict costs simultaneously on both US forward-deployed forces and Israeli territory, in what Iranian strategists call the doctrine of "multi-front warfare", aimed at fragmenting adversary attention and overwhelming missile defence capacity.

However, Iranian cyber capabilities have demonstrated increasing sophistication, including the 2012 Shamoon attack on Saudi Aramco, ongoing intrusion campaigns against US financial institutions, and operations against Israeli water infrastructure in 2020 (FireEye, 2014; CISA, 2020). Such capabilities afford Iran a sub-threshold space of competition that can impose costs and signal resolve short of kinetic redlines.

2.2 Israel's military capabilities

By all measurable indices, Israel's military, the IDF, is the most capable conventional military force in the Middle East. In pilot training, precision munitions, intelligence collection, and network-centric warfare, it has qualitative advantages that structurally compensate for its lack of mass. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) has around 340 F-16 and F-35I ("Adir") aircraft in service, the latter a fifth-generation stealth platform with advanced electronic warfare capabilities that significantly complicate Iranian air defence calculations (IISS, 2024). The Israeli integrated multi-tier architecture of Arrow-2, Arrow-3, David's Sling, and Iron Dome missile defence layers was highly effective in the April 2024 Iranian attack, intercepting about 99 percent of incoming projectiles—although Iranian analysts and independent observers have pointed out that the saturation of that attack was deliberately calibrated and that a full-scale Iranian strike would involve substantially greater volumes (Ben-David, 2024).

Israel's nuclear deterrent, estimated by authoritative non-proliferation analysts to consist of 90 warheads, is the ultimate guarantor of Israeli survival, and at the same time the source of the most profound escalatory risk in a hypothetical confrontation scenario (Kristensen & Norris, 2014). Israel's "nuclear ambiguity" (amimut) strategy is designed to preserve diplomatic options and make it difficult for adversaries to know how close they are to a target. Introducing nuclear issues into a war scenario with Iran would be a qualitative change in the danger environment. Israel's intelligence capabilities, particularly those of Unit 8200 (signals intelligence), and the operational reach of Mossad -- as evidenced by the attribution of assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists and the alleged sabotage of Natanz centrifuge facilities -- provide Israel with covert action options that complicate Iranian force protection and generate perpetual uncertainty about the security of Iranian strategic programs (Ronen, 2021).

2.3 US military capabilities and regional posture

American military strength in and rapidly deployable to the broader Middle East region vastly outpaces Iranian conventional forces, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in nearly every field. The U.S. is always patrolling the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. Fifth Fleet, Bahrain. Within CENTCOM's area of responsibility are the infrastructure needed to conduct a protracted air campaign the size and scope of those in Operation Desert Storm (1991) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003): Diego Garcia, Al Udeid in Qatar, Al Dhafra in the UAE, and multiple

Iraqi and Saudi facilities. The United States has kinetic options against deeply buried and hardened Iranian nuclear facilities—including the Fordow enrichment facility buried 90 meters under a mountain—that Israel may not have on its own, operating at the limits of its aircraft range and payload: the B-2 Spirit strategic bomber, capable of penetrating dense integrated air defence systems, and the GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator (30,000-lb bunker-busting munition) (Cordesman, 2019; Kroenig, 2012).

The United States also has unique electronic warfare, cyber offensive and space-based intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. But the US military has a weak spot in its position in the region. Some 40,000 U.S. military personnel are deployed at bases in Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, the UAE, Jordan and Saudi Arabia—all within range of Iranian ballistic missiles, drone swarms and proxy force assault. Iran has demonstrated its readiness to exploit this vulnerability repeatedly, such as in the more than 170 attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria in the series from October 2023 through January 2024 following the outbreak of the Gaza conflict (Blanchard et al., 2024).

3. Scenario Analysis

Scenario I: The Limited Israeli Strike – Surgical Precision and Limits

The most common open military conflict scenario explored in the academic and policy literature is a unilateral or predominantly Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities, aimed at delaying rather than destroying Iran's nuclear program, while minimising the risk of full-scale war. This is an evolution of the operational model of the 1981 Osirak raid and 2007 Al-Kibar strike, adapted to account for the far more complex geography, depth, dispersion and fortification of Iran's nuclear architecture.

The current rivalry is structurally connected with the triggering factors of this scenario. The Iranian nuclear program has advanced to the point that, by 2024, Iran has enough 60 percent enriched uranium for several weapons-grade devices and the technical knowledge base to produce weapons-grade material in days rather than months since the breakdown in JCPOA compliance began in 2019 (IAEA, 2024; Albright, 2024). A structural incentive for preventive action that increases with Iranian nuclear progress is provided by the Israeli concept of a "zone of immunity" – the threshold at which Iranian capabilities are immune to Israeli conventional attack.

Operationally, a strike package against Iran's major nuclear sites – Natanz (Isfahan province), Fordow (Qom province), Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center, and the Arak heavy water reactor – would require the IDF to pass through Saudi, Jordanian or Iraqi airspace (or a combination thereof), to maintain a tanker refuelling chain of unprecedented complexity for Israeli operations and to strike with enough ordnance to penetrate or disable deeply hardened structures. While the stealth features of the F-35I provide significant survivability benefits against Iranian S-300 air defence batteries, the payload restrictions and the need for multiple strike sorties against deeply buried facilities result in sustained exposure that is qualitatively different from the single-pass raids of 1981 and 2007. Kroenig (2012), Cordesman (2019) and others at the IISS have independently concluded that an Israeli strike alone might delay the Iranian program two to four years but could not destroy it outright. The outcome has important strategic implications for the cost-benefit analysis of military operations.

Iran would almost certainly calibrate its response to a limited Israeli strike to impose costs sufficient to deter future strikes, but not so disproportionate as to trigger American entry or Israeli escalation to a broader campaign. Iran's response toolkit, constrained by the April 2024 precedent that was explicitly calibrated as a signalling exercise and not a maximum-effort attack, includes: Hezbollah rocket and missile salvoes against northern Israeli population centers and strategic infrastructure; Hamas and PIJ activation in Gaza (although these capabilities were significantly degraded by post-October 2023 fighting); Houthi ballistic missile and drone attacks against Israeli territory and Red Sea shipping; Iraqi PMU strikes against U.S. bases to signal the U.S. cost of supporting Israeli action; and direct IRGC missile strikes against Israeli territory, potentially at a volume calibrated to overwhelm missile defence architecture.

The biggest risk here is not the first exchange, but the dynamics of escalation that follow. Israel's credible deterrent rests on its visible military effectiveness. If the strike causes ambiguous damage assessments, which seems likely given the dispersal and hardening of Iranian facilities, Israeli domestic political pressures could push for additional strikes, each of which would deepen further Iranian commitment to revenge and increase the likelihood of American involvement. The threshold of Hezbollah's intervention is especially important: if Hezbollah were to launch its full rocket arsenal, this would create a mass casualty situation for Israeli civilians, which would likely trigger an Israeli ground invasion of southern Lebanon, opening a second

major front with unknown consequences for the stability of the Lebanese state, the UNIFIL mission and regional spillover into Syria. The most likely outcome, therefore, is a limited but costly exchange that damages the Iranian nuclear program without destroying it, inflicts significant but bearable casualties on both sides, and establishes a deterrence equilibrium at higher tension—a "new normal" of intensified hostility without escalating into an existential conflict. The chances that this scenario remains below the threshold of direct US military involvement are moderate, but are very sensitive to Hezbollah's calculus and to the degree of damage to US assets by Iranian proxies.

Scenario II: Decisive force in a U.S.-led comprehensive air campaign – and its strategic paradoxes

In the second scenario, Washington opts to undertake a comprehensive air campaign against Iran's nuclear facilities, ballistic missile force, air defence system, naval forces and IRGC command and control, possibly in concert with Israel and with the quiet acquiescence of the Gulf Arab states. Most likely it would be in the context of a big Iranian-sponsored terrorist spectacle that would mobilise American public and congressional support for military action, an Iranian breakout to weapons-grade enrichment, or an Iranian conventional strike on American forces or allies.

And for many years this scenario has been the subject of American operational preparation in CENTCOM war-gaming. Declassified assessments, congressional testimony, and think-tank reconstructions provide a reasonable level of confidence about its general features. "Phase One will be a combination of cyberattacks on radar and command networks, electronic jamming, anti-radiation missiles against surface-to-air missile (SAM) battery emissions and B-2 Spirit stealth strikes on critical nodes to disrupt Iranian integrated air defences (SEAD). Phase Two would introduce GBU-57 MOPs and precision guided bombs to strike the nuclear target set, which includes Natanz, Fordow, Isfahan and Arak. Phase three would be the ballistic missile force, with IRGC Aerospace Force command infrastructure, mobile transporter-erector-launchers (TELs) using ISR-enabled targeting and hard-targeting of launch facilities. Naval action in the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea would also simultaneously neutralise Iran's fleet of fast-attack craft, midget submarine capability and mine-laying vessels.

The strategic logic of this scenario – that a sufficiently comprehensive military strike can destroy or significantly set back the Iranian nuclear program and degrade its retaliatory capability to manageable levels – has

several structural problems that create difficulties in making confident assessments. First, is the mobile TEL problem. Iran has invested heavily in dispersal, concealment and mobility of its ballistic missile force to ensure survivability against a U.S. first strike. Historical experience in hunting mobile missiles, from the Scud hunt in Desert Storm to NATO's Libya war, shows that even with improved ISR, it is still difficult to have high confidence in the destruction of mobile systems. With prewar numbers, 20-30% of Iran's remaining ballistic missile force could inflict catastrophic damage on Israeli cities and US forward bases.
Second, the proxy residual: An American air campaign against Iran does not simultaneously suppress forward deployed assets of Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iraqi PMU forces. Even a perfectly executed campaign against Iran itself would leave in place a network of proxies capable of conducting a long-term secondary conflict across multiple theatres. Hezbollah's approximately 150,000 rockets and missiles present a different order of strategic problem than Iranian ballistic missiles – they are dispersed, hidden in civilian infrastructure, and potentially used autonomously without continuous Iranian command authority.
Third, the Iranian internal cohesiveness effect: The historical record of strategic bombing campaigns—World War II, Vietnam, Iraq, and Serbia—provides powerful evidence that external military pressure tends to tie internal political coalitions closer together rather than apart at least in the short to medium term. A U.S. air campaign would not only bolster the IRGC's institutional standing and cement public support for nuclear development as a national security imperative, but would also likely spark a rally-around-the-flag reaction in Iran, sapping the reform movement and opposition groups.
Fourth, the economic warfare aspect: even a few weeks of Iranian closure of the Strait of Hormuz, where roughly 20% of the world's oil supply passes, would deliver a massive economic shock that would disrupt global financial markets, send oil prices soaring to $150 to $200 per barrel, and impose significant political costs on the administration that began the campaign. The U.S. Navy can ultimately reopen the Strait, but in the interim, Iran can leverage the lost time and economic damage as a potent coercive tool.
What is most likely to happen is not a quick surrender by Iran, but a long, complicated conflict on many fronts that could go on forever. The conflict would also pose strategic challenges to the regional and global system that could seriously jeopardise the political sustainability of continued military operations. This would cause significant tactical setbacks to Iran's nuclear program and military installations. Iranian

strategists are aware of this structural limitation and have deliberately incorporated it into their escalation management calculations. Iraq and Afghanistan have taught us a lot and they have a lot of influence on American strategic culture and political will to sustain a long-term military effort without a realistic end in sight.

Scenario III: Iranian Asymmetric Escalation - The Proxy War Scenario

For Iran, the third scenario continues to be preferable in the event of any military retaliation, as it permits Iran to sustain the strategic pressure, impose costs, and demonstrate resilience without crossing the threshold of direct military conflict with the United States, unleashing America's preponderance of the conventional military force. Unlike direct ballistic missile strikes against Israeli or American land, the most probable Iranian escalation will come in the form of a combination of proxy, asymmetric naval, cyber, and economic measures.

This situation, which Western analysts have labelled "grey zone warfare" and IRGC commanders have termed "strategic patience," is not simply reactive but a coherent strategic theory, grounded in the fact that Israel and the United States have demonstrated little political will to maintain costly, open-ended military commitments. Iran is trying to raise the cost in various ways without becoming nuclear war or full conventional campaign mobilisation, so that continuous military involvement between the United States and Israel is more costly than withdrawal or accommodation.

In this case, Iran would use its network of proxies to launch a multi-front activation in response to an Israeli attack on its nuclear facilities. Hezbollah would play a central role . Hezbollah would likely continue a controlled barrage of rockets and missiles into northern Israel at a level sufficient to prevent the resumption of normal economic and social activity . Hezbollah would keep most of its precision-guided weapons in reserve as an existential deterrent rather than firing all its weapons in a single , devastating salvo that could provoke a devastating Israeli response . Also the Houthis would intensify their attack on Red Sea ships, including using long-range drones to attack the Mediterranean. This would lead to huge increases in insurance premiums and disruption to supply lines for European and Israeli trade. "Iraqi PMU militants would periodically attack U.S. outposts in Syria and Iraq, requiring strict force protection regulations and limited forward placement." Iran is likely to increase cyberattacks against Gulf Arab state infrastructure supporting U.S. military operations in the region and Israeli

critical infrastructure, including banking sector networks, water treatment facilities, and electrical grid management systems. The Triton/TRISIS malware framework is a destructive weapon that can physically destroy petrochemical and power generation facilities (Dragos, 2017). Iranian actors are behind this malware framework that targets industrial control systems.

Examples of Persian Gulf naval activities include increased harassment of commercial shipping, the capture of vessels for leverage, the emplacement of naval mines in or near the approaches to the Strait of Hormuz, and the use of fast attack boats against tanker traffic. the U.S. The Navy may dominate in conventional naval battles, but the unconventional task of protecting thousands of miles of shipping lanes from swarm attacks, mine warfare, and land-based anti-ship missile batteries deployed along Iran's 2,440-kilometer coastline is not the same as fighting another fleet.

There is a strategic logic to this for Iran. It would impose heavy costs on the United States and Israel, demonstrate the credibility of Iranian deterrence, preserve political unity at home by portraying the conflict as defensive resistance to aggression, and avoid provoking the full-scale conventional response that Iran's conventional military would not be able to withstand. But the gravest danger in this scenario would be escalation through miscalculation: an unintended mass-casualty event at a civilian infrastructure site from a cyber operation, a Houthi attack sinking a U.S. naval vessel, or a Hezbollah missile barrage killing hundreds of Israeli civilians in Tel Aviv. Any one of these could provoke an American or Israeli response that escalates the asymmetric campaign into a direct military conflict and enters Scenario IV.

Scenario IV: Full Spectrum Escalation- Miscalculation, Entrapment, and the Limits of Deterrence

Scenario four, the most likely to have disastrous humanitarian, economic, and geopolitical consequences, is full-spectrum military conflict that results not from a conscious strategic decision but from a combination of miscalculation, intelligence failure, entrapment by proxy actors, or the breakdown of crisis communications under conditions of information overload and shortened decision timelines. This does not mean that anyone in the game wants a full scale conflict. It just means that the dynamics of escalation in the above scenarios are interacting in a way that de-escalatory choices are precluded before any side's political leadership can appropriately exercise control.

This possibility draws on the "inadvertent escalation" literature of Barry

Posen (1991), the "stability-instability paradox" analysis of nuclear dyads (Jervis, 1979), and the empirical record of how crises have escalated out of control in the historical cases of the 1914 July Crisis, the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, and the 1973 Yom Kippur War (Lebow, 1981; Allison, 1971). In each case the dynamics of final escalation were more a function of organisational processes, incentives to military pre-emption, inadequate intelligence, and the momentum of mobilisation than rational strategic calculation.

Particular mechanisms that could trigger unintended full-scale escalation in the Iran context include: a Hezbollah missile strike that causes mass civilian casualties that drives Israeli domestic politics toward demands for a ground invasion of Lebanon; an Iranian ballistic missile that penetrates Israeli defences and destroys a military headquarters, killing senior IDF commanders and triggering Israeli consideration of nuclear employment as a last resort; an Iranian proxy attack on a U.S. carrier strike group that kills hundreds of American sailors and triggers Congressional authorisation for war; a U.S. special operations raid into Iran that kills senior IRGC commanders, triggering an Iranian direct missile strike on U.S. bases that kills hundreds, crossing the threshold for American direct military retaliation.

In a full-spectrum conflict, Iran's operational strategy would likely include cyber attacks against critical American infrastructure, Persian Gulf closure operations, simultaneous Hezbollah, Houthi and PMU activation and maximum use of ballistic missiles against Israeli and American targets, potentially at saturation volumes to overwhelm multi-layer missile defence systems. Iranian ballistic missile strikes would primarily be aimed at the Dimona nuclear complex, Israeli Air Force bases (Nevatim, Hatzerim and Ramon) and American military installations throughout the area. The U.S. and Israel would respond in a manner similar to the extensive air campaign described in Scenario II with ground operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon. That would likely include the Syrians, some of the issues with the Kurdish players, and possible Turkish issues about stability in northern Syria.

One has to be careful with the nuclear dimension in this case. "Any credible public evaluation would be that Iran does not have nuclear weapons today. But if Iran crosses the weapons-grade threshold in the months before an open confrontation, the strategic calculations of all parties would be radically altered. Even a crude Iranian nuclear deterrent of two or three devices would impose a restraint on Israeli and American operational planning akin to that which characterised NATO-Warsaw Pact confrontation in Europe: the knowledge that catastrophic escalation

remains possible would act as a powerful brake on the political will to pursue unconditional military objectives. Given the dangers of first strike instability, use-or-lose pressures, and communication breakdowns that defined superpower nuclear rivalry in the Cold War, Israel's own nuclear deterrent would be in strategic dialogue with an Iranian capability. A full spectrum conflict would be structurally destabilising in ways that go far beyond the immediate combatants and have significant regional spillover implications. If Hezbollah unleashes the full extent of its rocket arsenal in a conflict in Lebanon, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese could head north into Syria, which already is home to 1.5 million Syrian refugees. It could trigger a massive humanitarian catastrophe. Israel's emergency response and health care systems would be overwhelmed and northern Israel's infrastructure would be devastated. Attacks by Iran on Saudi and Emirati energy infrastructure would create an oil price shock of historic proportions, a real danger given the Houthi and Iranian capabilities demonstrated in the September 2019 Abqaiq-Khurais offensive. A loss of faith in regional security would widen credit spreads, cause capital flight from emerging markets and raise the prospect of sovereign debt crises in heavily indebted developing countries reliant on Gulf financial flows.

It's pretty hard to predict the length of a full-spectrum battle. Iran's strategic culture and its history, especially the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, are illustrative of the country's impressive capacity to withstand hardship and to continue on in the face of the harshest economic hardship. What the US may see as a 30-day air battle may in fact evolve into a multiyear struggle of insurgency and proxy war that will cost the US dearly in financial resources, political will and credibility. This structural pattern was deeply ingrained in American strategic consciousness in the course of the 2003 intervention in Iraq.

Scenario V: De-Escalation and Negotiated Constraint - Structural Conditions and Political Preconditions

The fifth scenario takes the opposite track from armed conflict, and instead explores the structural conditions under which hostile dynamics may be managed, contained or resolved diplomatically. Moreover, the situation does not require good intentions on any party's side. Instead, the scenario is an expression of the systemic condition for negotiated de-escalation: the situation where the costs of conflict maintenance outweigh the costs of accommodation for all major actors at once. There are few historical precedents for negotiated limitations on adversarial projects in the face of extreme antagonism; but the precedents

that do exist are instructive. The 2015 JCPOA demonstrated Iran's willingness to accept significant constraints on its nuclear program, including reducing its stockpile of enriched uranium from 10,000 kg to 300 kg, limiting enrichment to 3.67 percent, refurbishing the Fordow facility, and allowing intrusive monitoring by the IAEA (Fitzpatrick, 2015), in exchange for sanctions relief and an implicit recognition of Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program. The JCPOA collapsed after the US exited the deal in 2018 under the Trump administration and placed "maximum pressure" sanctions on Iran. This further underscores the fragility of negotiated arrangements and the need for sustained political will on the part of all parties to sustain them.

Among the structural conditions that could enable de-escalation following a limited military exchange are: the presence of credible mediating actors acceptable to all parties (Qatar and Oman have historically played constructive roles in back-channel U.S.-Iran communication); the existence of a face-saving formula that allows Iranian leadership to frame accommodation as a strategic victory rather than capitulation; and the domestic political space for American and Israeli leadership to accept less than unconditional Iranian compliance.

The role third party actors can have in promoting de-escalation is of particular interest. Gulf Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, had been moving rapidly toward normalisation with Israel before the October 2023 Gaza conflict erupted. They have strong incentives to avoid a catastrophic regional war that would undermine their ambitions for economic development, generate refugee flows and encourage Iranian targeting of their infrastructure. Beijing's leverage over Tehran and its incentives to use that leverage to de-escalate the situation are both considerable, given its major economic links to Iran, which are undercut by the shadow tanker fleet's breach of sanctions, and its strategic stake in the stability of the Persian Gulf as an oil import corridor. European countries have no military means to influence the situation by themselves but can exploit their diplomatic relations and economic interests to support measures aimed at building confidence and eventually resuming discussions on nuclear limits.

The chief obstacle is the profound mistrust that has built up over four decades of hostility between Washington and Tehran, and the existence of domestic political constituencies in both Israel and the United States, and within the Iranian hardline establishment itself, for whom institutional interests and ideological commitments are more served by the continuation of confrontation than by accommodation. The 2015 JCPOA proved that such challenges are not insurmountable, but its

eventual failure proved that no one deal can solve them forever.

4. Cross-Cutting Analysis: Escalation Dynamics and Stabilising Factors

4.1 The Role of Third Parties and Regional Actors

In all five scenarios, the regional system would be highly fragmented, vulnerable to conflicting external forces. The Gaza conflict has broken the Abraham Accords framework of normalisation, but politically it has at least delivered intelligence sharing agreements between the Israeli and Gulf Arab security services which could be a stabilising element by providing early warning of Iranian proxy activation. Turkey's dual status as a NATO member with a strong commitment to avoiding Iranian regional dominance while also being wary of Israeli conduct in Gaza complicates escalation management.

The conflict in Ukraine has pushed Russia and Iran much closer together. As part of that deal, Iran provided Russia with state-of-the-art air defence equipment, and possibly nuclear technology, in exchange for the Shahed-series drones which Russia used to attack Ukrainian civilian sites (Kofman & Lee, 2023). The Russia-Iran alignment is a structural challenge to U.S. crisis management that would require U.S. military action against Iran to take into account the possibility of Russian intelligence sharing with Tehran, Russian electronic interference in U.S. space-based ISR assets, and the symbolic politics of a scenario in which U.S. military action against an Iranian nuclear program could be perceived by Moscow as setting a precedent for NATO action against Russian nuclear forces.

Special attention should be paid to the participation of China. Despite U.S. sanctions, Beijing remains Iran's biggest commercial partner and its largest purchaser of Iranian oil. Thanks to its economic ties with Tehran, China now has a vested interest in the stability of Iran. China's willingness to use this leverage for regional peace when Chinese strategic interests are properly aligned as evidenced by its role as a mediator in the Saudi-Iranian normalisation in March 2023, which was a major diplomatic achievement in and of itself. While Beijing supports Iran, it is not committed enough to prevent Beijing from intervening to mediate a crisis that could threaten Persian Gulf energy supplies, disrupt regional infrastructure projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, and potentially trigger an oil price shock that would jeopardise China's own economic growth trajectory.

4.2 Domestic Political Constraints on Each Actor

Scenario analysis is deficient if the internal political economies that limit strategic choices for each actor are not taken into account. The legacy of the interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan has profoundly affected the political calculus of military action against Iran in the United States, leading to bipartisan suspicion of open-ended Middle Eastern military commitments. The political space for a large military effort is constrained by the requirement for legislative approval, ongoing public opinion polls indicating little appetite for new Middle East conflicts, and the financial strain of simultaneous competition with China and Russia. Or this political calculus can change quickly with a significant Iranian strike on American troops, or an Iranian-backed terrorist attack on American soil. The internal political environment in Israel is a potential source of strategic overreach, but also of strategic strength, as evidenced by the extraordinary national will and military power brought to bear in the October 2023 battle. The Israeli coalition government is also under internal political pressure as coalition members have maximalist objectives against Iran and Hezbollah that could lead to more extensive military actions than is advised by independent Israeli security experts. Israel's multi-layered missile defence system was successful in April 2024, but the public's faith in Israel's ability to withstand Iranian missile attacks does not fully take into account the saturation scenario. The domestic political economy of Iran is characterised by the underlying tension between the revolutionary ideological imperatives of the Islamic Republic, which render any accommodation by an Iranian leader with the US and Israel politically toxic, and the brutal economic pressures of sanctions, which have resulted in a perpetual state of public unrest as exemplified by the protest movements of 2019 and 2022-2023. This tension produces a strategic paradox: Iran is moving toward accommodation because of the economic costs of conflict, but it is moving toward escalation because of the political costs of appearing to give in to pressure from the United States and Israel. Iranian leaders have historically employed a mix of public maximalism coupled with private pragmatism, selective engagement and the purposeful leveraging of regional conflicts to divert domestic audiences from economic woes.

4.3 The Nuclear Escalation Threshold

The most dangerous path of escalation, this research finds, is the introduction of nuclear weapons. As noted above, Iran does not yet have deployable nuclear weapons capability, but its breakout timetable is estimated to be days or weeks, as of 2024 estimations. Conditions that might produce Iranian leadership approval of a nuclear breakout and

possibly first use would include the existence of an existential threat to the regime, including overwhelming conventional military defeat; immediate evidence of an Israeli or American attack on the person of the Supreme Leader or collective IRGC leadership; and the availability of a deliverable weapon. None of these things are in place at the time of writing, but they do highlight the importance of keeping open channels of communication and escalation points even in the midst of an ongoing armed war.

Israel's nuclear employment doctrine is based on the Samson Option, which, according to declared policy, scholarly research and historical background, argues that nuclear weapons should be used only in situations where the country is facing an existential threat (Cohen, 2010). Adding Iranian nuclear capabilities would radically alter this calculus by creating a nuclear competition where the nuclear arsenals would be highly suspect in both their first-strike stability and second-strike credibility. One of the largest structural risks in the scenario landscape is the absence of a technical or institutional infrastructure in nuclear crisis communication between Israel and Iran, or the United States and Iran in the nuclear domain, that was painstakingly built up between the superpowers during the Cold War. These include the Standing Consultative Commission, the Nuclear Risk Reduction Centers and hotlines;

5. Assessment: Probable Outcomes and Key Uncertainties

Now that each scenario has been mapped out and the cross-cutting dynamics of escalation, de-escalation and third-party intervention have been considered, a structured assessment can be made of the probable terrain of outcomes. This evaluation is not intended to be a prediction of the future, but rather to identify the structural variables that make certain results more or less probable given present conditions, while acknowledging the significant influence of contingency, leadership psychology, and stochastic events in determining actual results. The most likely outcome of any military conflict in the near-to-medium term is a limited and costly exchange that is more consistent with Scenario I and parts of Scenario III than the full-spectrum war of Scenario IV. This conclusion is based on the following structural factors: the mutual deterrent dynamic between Israel and Hezbollah, which has produced long periods of de facto restraint despite ongoing low-level conflict; the political constraints imposed by the United States on an unrestricted military commitment; Iran's fundamental rational interest in regime survival, which counsels against actions that would trigger full-

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scale hostility; and the existence of implicit signalling channels that allow for the communication of escalatory limits.

The greatest uncertainty affecting the outcomes towards the catastrophic Scenario IV pathway is the decision-making autonomy of proxy actors. Hezbollah's response to an attack on an Israeli nuclear facility may not be entirely in Tehran's hands. The command dynamics of the organization, its internal Lebanese constituents, and its political imperatives are all different from the Iranian strategic direction. Likewise, Houthi activity in the Red Sea has shown a certain autonomous initiative that has oftentimes surprised their American adversaries as well as their Iranian benefactors. A badly bungled proxy action, be it a Houthi missile hitting an American ship or a Hezbollah attack killing hundreds of Israeli civilians, could trigger a vicious escalation spiral that no major actor desires and no crisis management mechanism can forestall.

It is important to stress that assessments focusing on the military often do not give due consideration to the economic aspect of any combat scenario. Iran's proven capacity to threaten the flow of energy through the Persian Gulf – by closing the Strait of Hormuz, by Houthi strikes on Saudi infrastructure, and by direct attacks on tanker traffic – is a weapon of mass economic disruption whose impact would ripple far beyond the immediate belligerents, imposing heavy costs on Asian economies dependent on Gulf oil, on European economies already stressed by volatile energy markets, and on developing economies whose fiscal positions are highly sensitive to shifts in commodity prices. Therefore, any American or Israeli military campaign must be assessed not only by benchmarks for military progress but also by the economic costs to the wider international community. And that could create tremendous pressure from allies to end the war long before military objectives have been achieved.

Even with a great military victory, the problem of post-conflict stabilisation would be extraordinarily difficult. A damaged but surviving Iranian regime would most likely speed up its nuclear program given the international isolation and domestic political hardening, because Iranian strategic thinkers have studied the lesson of North Korea (which kept its WMD programs) versus Iraq (which abandoned them before the 2003 invasion). At the current level of the world economy, no viable international coalition of donors would be able to finance the reconstruction after a regional fight that would involve the entire arsenal of Hezbollah, or a Gulf conflict that would cause serious damage to infrastructure.

6. Theoretical Implications: Deterrence, Rationality and the Limits of Compellence

But more generally, the scenario analysis developed here has implications beyond the particular case of the Iran-United States-Israel confrontation for the general issues of deterrence theory and the conditions of interstate war in the twenty-first century. While these remain important analytical starting points, the structural features of this conflict – nuclear asymmetry, the complexity of proxy networks, economic interdependence, domestic political constraints, and the presence of non-state actors with substantial independent decision-making ability – render classical deterrence models of limited explanatory value. Classical deterrence theory (Schelling, 1966; Jervis, 1984; Powell, 1990) assumes rational unitary actors with stable preferences, credible commitment devices, and sufficient information to calculate adversaries' capacity and resolve. The Iran-U.S.-Israel triangle shatters many of these presumptions. Iran's institutionally divided decision-making system is composed of the Supreme Leader, the IRGC, the elected presidency and a number of factional networks that do not necessarily share preferences. The American decision-making process is limited by the need to be accountable to democratic institutions, to respect legislative prerogatives and to meet alliance management requirements. These factors are also major obstacles to collective action for crisis management. The decision making of Israelis under a coalition government shows how different political ideologies can coexist. This may lead to strategic problems under duress. Classical deterrence models weren't built to accommodate the added layer of dispersed agency that the proxy network generates. The case also challenges the compellence literature which has focused on the use of real or threatened military force to persuade an enemy to take a certain action rather than merely to deter action. The US maximum pressure sanctions strategy imposed significant economic penalties on Iran from 2018 to 2021, but did not induce Iranian nuclear restraint, resulting in an acceleration of enrichment operations. This is consistent with academic research on economic coercion, which shows that sanctions rarely succeed in changing the behaviour of targets with high stakes in the regime, a strong ability to mobilise nationalists and the capacity to evade sanctions networks (Hufbauer et al. 2007; Pape 1997). Military compellence – the threat or use of force to compel Iran to denuclearise – faces similar structural challenges. Iranian willingness to accept the political capitulation that would undermine regime legitimacy is not directly correlated with the costs that can be imposed through air power.

The scenario analysis reinforces the conclusion that the Iran case is best explained by what Fearon (1995) calls the "bargaining model of war"—an explanation that emphasises information asymmetries, commitment problems, and indivisibility problems that prevent adversaries from achieving negotiated settlements that they prefer to costly war. The information gaps and credibility deficits preventing the emergence of stable diplomatic equilibria are rooted in Iranian doubts about American resolve, American doubts about Iranian nuclear progress and leadership intent, and the commitment problem arising from Iran's inability to credibly assure adherence to nuclear constraints without intrusive verification. According to this analytical framework then, the reason for armed confrontation is not irrationality in the sense of a failure of negotiation to settle the information and commitment problems before the costs of waiting become intolerable to one or more of the parties.

7. Implications for Stability in Crisis Policy

These arguments point to a number of policy-relevant implications, beyond the specifics of the conflict between Iran, the United States and Israel. These findings underscore the importance of robust analytical tools for high-stakes security environments while at the same time demonstrating the appropriate epistemic modesty around the limitations of academic scenario analysis as a guide to policy.

First, crisis communication systems are an imperative structural necessity even in the face of severe adversary animosity. The United States and Iran lack a direct military communication link—the Cold War hotline—that could prove disastrous in the truncated decision timelines of a missile exchange. In addition, back-channel techniques must be developed and tested before the crisis by Swiss good offices, Omani mediators, or UN Security Council procedures in order to be successful under duress. Iran also sent signals through third parties in the Iranian attack on Israel in April 2024, allowing the installation of Israeli and American defence systems. This suggests that in a crisis, given sufficient incentive, adversaries lacking formal communication channels could develop efficient signalling systems. But no informal arrangement can substitute for established crisis management infrastructure.

Second, control of the autonomy of proxy actors is an important but often overlooked aspect of escalation control. American and Israeli policy needs to focus on the long-term conditions under which Iranian command and control of Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iraqi PMU units can be disrupted. Otherwise, a manageable crisis could become an uncontrolled multi-front conflict. Iranian strategic communication, on the other hand,

should aim at creating sensible boundaries for proxy action that enemies can understand, thus being a de facto brake on unintended escalation. The literature on alliance management and extended deterrence, which often emphasises the U.S.-NATO-Soviet Union triangle, provides appropriate theoretical foundations for the problem of proxy management. Third, the financial consequences of war should be integrated systematically into political and military preparation, to the extent that they are not at present. The first-order strategic factor limiting the political sustainability of military operations and creating powerful third-party incentives for ending war is the vulnerability of the global economic system to interruption of Persian Gulf energy. Proactively, the political leadership in the United States and Israel could reduce the coercive power of Iranian threats to close the Strait by preparing for the economic warfare aspect of the conflict (e.g., strategic petroleum reserve deployment, allied burden-sharing agreements, alternative energy route activation).

Fourth, the nuclear escalation path requires a commitment to rigorous analysis and crisis management preparedness that goes beyond the confines of traditional military strategy. While unlikely in any scenario short of an existential defeat in a conventional war, the conditions for Israeli nuclear employment and the possibility of Iranian nuclear breakout in the early stages of a conflict call for pre-crisis planning for nuclear signalling, red-line communication, and crisis termination that American, Israeli, and possibly third-party decisionmakers have not publicly developed to sufficient levels of specificity. In this particular regional context, nuclear thresholds are not as far removed as they may appear in peacetime strategic calculations, a precedent being the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Israel is said to have reached the first stages of nuclear weapons setup before American resupply turned the military situation around.

Fifth and perhaps most importantly, the scenario analysis in this essay reinforces the conclusion that there is no military solution that fully addresses the Iran issue in the way advocates of maximum pressure would like. Even the most optimistic military scenarios merely delay Iran’s nuclear development for a short period, at the cost of serious geopolitical challenges, ongoing proxy war, and economic turmoil in the region. Worst-case scenarios lead to disastrous escalation without assured military victory. Iran’s location, the depth of its proxies, its economic resiliency and political unity under duress are structural constraints that prevent military power from producing long-term solutions. This analytical conclusion also advises the creation of a comprehensive

strategy that combines military deterrence with diplomatic engagement, economic coercion with economic incentives, and unilateral pressure with multilateral coalition-building. This approach has been advanced by serious scholars and practitioners in different forms but has always been thwarted by the political dynamics of all the principal players.

8. Conclusion

This study systematically analyses a potential military confrontation between Iran and a coalition of the United States and Israel. Five options are offered from limited Israeli strikes to full-on confrontation and negotiated de-escalation. In order to place the case in the broader theoretical tradition of strategic studies, the analysis has considered the military capabilities, strategic doctrines, escalation dynamics, regional spillover effects, and domestic political constraints shaping the conflict landscape in light of deterrence theory, compellence literature, and the bargaining model of war.

There are several general implications of the analysis. Any military confrontation would likely be limited to sub-catastrophic regional impact levels with only a moderate probability, but this is highly dependent on the effectiveness of crisis communication mechanisms, which are currently at best rudimentary, the performance of missile defence systems under saturation conditions and proxy actor decision-making. Given Iran's geographic depth, the redundancy of its proxy networks, and its demonstrated capacity for economic coercion, it is highly improbable that the Iranian problem can be definitively resolved by the use of air force alone. The most dangerous path to catastrophic conflict is not the deliberate escalatory choice, but inadvertent escalation through miscalculation, proxy entanglement, and the breakdown of crisis management under shortened decision deadlines.

The theoretical contribution of this analysis is to show that the Iran-U.S.-Israel conflict is a "complex deterrence" environment. This means that while traditional deterrence frameworks still have analytical merit, they need to be substantially reconfigured to take account of the role of non-state proxy actors with a high degree of autonomous agency, the nuclear asymmetry between the parties and the immense domestic political constraints on the strategic leeway of each actor. An important objective for future security studies research is to develop appropriate theoretical frameworks for complex deterrence situations.

The policy implications are sobering: if the military planning institutions, political leadership, and analytical community do not make more

systematic investments in escalation control, crisis communication infrastructure, and the development of diplomatic off-ramps that can be pulled even in the face of severe military pressure, there will be crisis management failures just waiting to happen. This is a cheap investment, but as this research indicates, the price of not doing so could be civilisational.

The catastrophic war between Iran and its main adversaries in the Middle East is not unavoidable in the twenty-first century. But assuming deterrence will take care of itself rather requires a sustained analytical, diplomatic, and institutional effort to build the crisis stability structures that the Cold War took decades to build and that the current regional security environment has not yet produced. This paper aims to contribute to this analysis.

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