

From Regional Escalation to Global Crisis since January 2026: Conflict Dynamics and De-Escalation Pathways in the U.S.–Israel–Iran Confrontation

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ABSTRACT

The escalating confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran has evolved from a regional security crisis into a global geopolitical and economic disruption. The central problem addressed in this article is the rapid transformation of localized military escalation into a complex, multi-level conflict with global consequences, including energy insecurity, proxy warfare proliferation, and economic instability. This study adopts a qualitative research design combining process tracing and thematic content analysis to examine how escalation dynamics have unfolded since January 2026. Data are drawn from policy reports, official statements, security analyses, and recent conflict developments. The study employs an integrated analytical model that links conflict escalation dynamics, deterrence failure, and proxy warfare mechanisms to explain how interactions among state and non-state actors contribute to conflict expansion. The findings reveal that iterative retaliation cycles, strategic misalignment among key actors, and the growing role of proxy forces have reinforced both horizontal and vertical escalation. Furthermore, disruptions to critical energy routes, particularly around the Strait of Hormuz, have amplified global economic vulnerability, transforming a regional confrontation into an international crisis. The analysis also considers alternative interpretations, including the possibility that escalation is driven by strategic signaling and domestic political calculations rather than solely by deterrence failure. The study concludes that the absence of credible diplomatic mechanisms and the entrenchment of hard-line strategic positions significantly hinder de-escalation efforts. Without structured intervention, the conflict risks becoming a protracted and systemic global crisis. The article recommends multi-level de-escalation strategies, including third-party mediation, confidence-building measures, backchannel diplomacy, and the gradual reintroduction of cooperative regional security frameworks.

Keywords: Conflict Escalation, Deterrence Failure, Proxy Warfare, De-Escalation, Energy Security, Geopolitical Instability, Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

The evolving confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran represents one of the most consequential geopolitical crises of the contemporary international system. What initially appeared as a contained episode of strategic confrontation has rapidly transformed into a complex, multi-layered conflict with regional and global ramifications. This transformation reflects a broader pattern in modern warfare, where localized disputes are increasingly embedded within global political, economic, and security networks, thereby amplifying their impact beyond immediate theaters of engagement. From a conflict management perspective, this crisis exemplifies the dynamics of conflict escalation, a process through which interactions between adversaries intensify in scope, scale, and complexity. As noted by Louis Kriesberg (2012), escalation is not

merely the result of deliberate strategic choice but often emerges from iterative action–reaction processes in which each party interprets the other’s behavior as hostile, thereby justifying further retaliation (p. 145).

In the case of the U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation, cycles of military strikes and counter-strikes have reinforced mutual threat perceptions, creating a self-sustaining escalation spiral. Moreover, the conflict illustrates the limitations of traditional deterrence theory in contemporary asymmetric environments. Classical deterrence assumes rational actors and clear communication of credible threats; however, as Thomas Schelling (1966) argues, deterrence is highly sensitive to misperception, uncertainty, and the strategic manipulation of risk (p. 36). In the present context, divergent strategic objectives and ideological orientations among the actors have undermined deterrence stability, increasing the likelihood of miscalculation and unintended escalation.

A defining feature of this confrontation is its hybrid and transnational character, particularly the central role of proxy actors and non-state armed groups. According to Mary Kaldor (2013), contemporary conflicts are increasingly shaped by “new wars,” in which state and non-state actors interact within decentralized networks of violence that blur the boundaries between war, crime, and politics (p. 2). Iran’s strategic reliance on proxy forces across the Middle East exemplifies this pattern, enabling indirect confrontation while simultaneously expanding the geographic scope of the conflict.

In addition to its security dimensions, the crisis has generated significant global economic repercussions, particularly through disruptions to energy supply chains. The strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz, through which a substantial proportion of the world’s oil supply transits, renders it a critical vulnerability in the global economy. As emphasized by Daniel Yergin (2006), control over energy chokepoints has long been a central factor in geopolitical competition, with disruptions capable of triggering widespread economic instability (p. 233). The current conflict has reaffirmed this reality, as rising oil prices and supply uncertainties reverberate across global markets, affecting both developed and developing economies.

Furthermore, the crisis underscores the erosion of international diplomatic mechanisms and conflict management institutions. The weakening of multilateral agreements, combined with increasing geopolitical polarization, has reduced the availability of credible platforms for negotiation and mediation. As William Zartman (2001) notes, successful conflict resolution often depends on the presence of a “mutually hurting stalemate,” a condition in which parties recognize that continued conflict is more costly than negotiation (p. 8). However, in the current scenario, the absence of such recognition among key actors has prolonged hostilities and limited prospects for immediate de-escalation.

This article argues that the U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation should be understood as a complex escalation system, characterized by the interaction of military, political, and economic dynamics that collectively drive conflict expansion. By integrating insights from conflict escalation theory, deterrence theory, and contemporary analyses of hybrid warfare, the study seeks to explain how and why the conflict has evolved into a global crisis. It further examines the structural barriers to de-escalation and identifies potential pathways for conflict management in an increasingly volatile international environment. In doing so, the article contributes to the broader literature on conflict management by highlighting the need for adaptive, multi-level approaches that account for the interconnected nature of modern conflicts. The findings underscore the urgency of re-establishing effective diplomatic mechanisms and developing innovative strategies to mitigate escalation in complex geopolitical crises.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the escalation dynamics and de-escalation prospects of the U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation since January 2026. The research combines process tracing and thematic content analysis to investigate how military actions, strategic decisions, and proxy engagements contributed to the transformation of a regional confrontation into a broader global crisis.

Process tracing is employed to identify causal mechanisms linking specific events and decisions to subsequent stages of escalation. This method allows the study to reconstruct sequences of action and reaction among the principal actors and to assess how military strikes, retaliatory responses, and proxy interventions contributed to

conflict expansion. By examining the chronological development of the crisis, process tracing helps explain not only what occurred but also how escalation pathways emerged and became self-reinforcing.

Thematic content analysis is used to examine policy documents, official government statements, reports from international organizations, security assessments, and scholarly literature. Through systematic coding and categorization of recurring themes, the study identifies key patterns related to deterrence failure, strategic signaling, proxy warfare, energy security, and conflict management. This approach enables the comparison of different interpretations of the conflict while highlighting common drivers of escalation.

Data for the study are derived exclusively from secondary sources, including academic publications, policy reports, governmental communications, and analyses produced by recognized research institutions. Source triangulation is employed to enhance reliability by comparing information across multiple independent sources. To strengthen analytical rigor and reduce interpretive bias, the study incorporates counterfactual reasoning and alternative explanations. Specifically, it examines whether the observed escalation could have been mitigated under different diplomatic, military, or strategic conditions and evaluates competing interpretations regarding the motivations of key actors. This approach contributes to a more balanced assessment of conflict dynamics and de-escalation possibilities.

Conceptual Framework: Understanding Escalation Dynamics

Understanding the transformation of the confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran into a broader global crisis requires a robust conceptual framework grounded in theories of conflict escalation, deterrence, and contemporary hybrid warfare. This section integrates these theoretical perspectives to explain how and why localized interactions evolve into complex, multi-level conflicts. At the core of this analysis is conflict escalation theory, which conceptualizes escalation as a dynamic and interactive process rather than a linear progression. According to Louis Kriesberg (2012), escalation occurs when opposing parties intensify their methods of struggle, expand the scope of participation, or increase the resources committed to the conflict (p. 147). This process is often driven by reciprocal action–reaction mechanisms, where each side interprets the other’s behavior as aggressive, thereby legitimizing further escalation. In the present case, cycles of military strikes and counter-strikes illustrate how escalation becomes self-reinforcing, even in the absence of a clear strategic objective.

A key dimension of escalation is the distinction between vertical and horizontal escalation. Vertical escalation refers to the intensification of conflict through the use of more destructive weaponry or increased frequency of attacks, while horizontal escalation involves the geographic or functional expansion of the conflict to new actors or regions. As noted by Herman Kahn (1965), escalation can be understood as a spectrum or “ladder,” in which actors move incrementally toward higher levels of conflict intensity (p. 38). The U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation demonstrates both forms: vertical escalation is evident in the deployment of advanced military technologies, while horizontal escalation is reflected in the involvement of proxy forces and the spread of hostilities across the Middle East. Closely related to escalation dynamics is the concept of deterrence and its failure.

Classical deterrence theory posits that actors can prevent adversaries from taking undesirable actions by credibly threatening severe retaliation. However, as Thomas Schelling (1966) emphasizes, deterrence is inherently unstable because it relies on perception, communication, and the manipulation of risk (p. 35). Misinterpretations, signaling failures, and asymmetric objectives can undermine deterrence, leading to unintended escalation. In the current conflict, divergent strategic goals and ideological commitments among the actors have weakened deterrence mechanisms, making escalation more likely.

Another critical component of the conceptual framework is the role of security dilemmas, which arise when measures taken by one state to enhance its security are perceived as threats by others. Robert Jervis (1978) explains that the security dilemma is particularly acute in environments characterized by uncertainty and mistrust, where defensive actions can be misinterpreted as offensive intentions (p. 169). This dynamic is evident in the U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation, where military buildups and preemptive actions by one actor provoke countermeasures from others, thereby intensifying the conflict. The framework also incorporates

insights from the literature on proxy warfare and hybrid conflict, which have become defining features of contemporary international security.

According to Andrew Mumford (2013), proxy wars allow states to pursue strategic objectives indirectly by supporting non-state actors, thereby reducing the costs and risks associated with direct confrontation (p. 11). In this context, Iran's reliance on proxy groups enables it to project power across the region while avoiding full-scale conventional warfare. However, this strategy also contributes to horizontal escalation by expanding the conflict across multiple theaters and complicating efforts at conflict resolution.

Furthermore, the concept of complex interdependence provides a useful lens for understanding how regional conflicts generate global consequences. Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (1977) argue that in an interconnected world, economic, political, and security issues are deeply intertwined, such that disruptions in one domain can have cascading effects across others (p. 24). The disruption of energy flows through critical chokepoints—particularly the Strait of Hormuz—illustrates how a regional conflict can trigger global economic instability, reinforcing the interconnected nature of contemporary crises. Finally, the framework draws on ripeness theory in conflict resolution to assess the prospects for de-escalation. I. William Zartman (2001) posits that conflicts become ripe for resolution when parties perceive themselves to be in a mutually hurting stalemate and recognize the existence of a viable way out (p. 8).

In the current confrontation, however, the absence of such conditions—combined with entrenched positions and ongoing escalation—suggests that the conflict has not yet reached a stage conducive to meaningful negotiation. In sum, this conceptual framework highlights that escalation in the U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation is not accidental but emerges from the interaction of multiple structural and strategic factors, including action–reaction dynamics, deterrence failure, security dilemmas, and proxy warfare. By situating the conflict within these theoretical perspectives, the study provides a comprehensive basis for analyzing both the drivers of escalation and the challenges of de-escalation in an increasingly complex global security environment.

Drivers Of Escalation

The escalation of the confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran can be understood as the outcome of multiple interacting structural and strategic forces that reinforce conflict intensification over time. One of the primary drivers is the deep incompatibility of core strategic objectives among the parties. Each actor enters the conflict with distinct security priorities and long-term political goals that are not easily reconcilable. When adversaries pursue mutually exclusive outcomes, the likelihood of compromise diminishes, and interactions tend to shift toward coercive strategies rather than negotiated settlement. This aligns with Kriesberg's observation that escalation is more likely when parties perceive their fundamental interests as zero-sum, thereby framing concessions as unacceptable losses rather than potential gains (Kriesberg, 2012, p. 149). In such contexts, conflict becomes self-reinforcing, as each side interprets the other's persistence as justification for continued resistance.

Another significant driver of escalation is the presence of iterative retaliation cycles, where each act of aggression generates a counter-response that escalates the intensity of the conflict. These cycles are not merely reactive but are shaped by perceptions of honor, credibility, and deterrence. As Schelling (1966) explains, coercive interactions often involve the manipulation of risk rather than outright force, where each party attempts to influence the other's expectations through limited but credible threats (p. 36). However, when communication is ambiguous or mistrust is high, these signaling strategies can backfire, leading to misinterpretation and unintended escalation. In the current confrontation, retaliatory exchanges between state actors and affiliated groups illustrate how conflict can intensify even in the absence of a deliberate decision to expand the war, as each response is framed as necessary for maintaining credibility and deterrence.

The involvement of proxy actors and non-state armed groups further accelerates escalation by expanding the number of participants and complicating attribution of responsibility. Proxy warfare enables states to engage indirectly while maintaining plausible deniability, but it also increases the complexity of the conflict environment. Mumford (2013) argues that proxy relationships allow states to project influence without direct confrontation, yet they simultaneously create fragmented battlefields where control over escalation becomes

more difficult (p. 13). In the context of this confrontation, the diffusion of conflict across multiple theaters has led to a situation in which localized incidents can trigger broader responses, thereby linking otherwise separate arenas of violence into a single interconnected system. This horizontal expansion increases the risk that isolated engagements may spiral into wider regional instability.

Domestic political considerations also play a crucial role in driving escalation, as leaders must balance external strategic interests with internal pressures from political constituencies, institutions, and public opinion. In high-stakes conflicts, demonstrating strength and resolve often becomes politically advantageous, while concessions may be perceived as weakness. Jervis (1978) notes that leaders operating under conditions of uncertainty and domestic scrutiny are more likely to adopt defensive postures that may be interpreted as offensive by adversaries, thereby exacerbating the security dilemma (p. 171). In such environments, decision-makers may prioritize short-term political survival over long-term conflict resolution, reinforcing policies that sustain or intensify hostilities rather than reduce them.

Finally, escalation is driven by structural conditions of mistrust and the erosion of credible communication channels. When diplomatic mechanisms weaken or collapse, the ability of actors to signal intentions accurately is significantly reduced. This creates an environment in which worst-case assumptions dominate strategic calculations. Keohane and Nye (1977) emphasize that in systems characterized by complex interdependence, disruptions in one domain can quickly propagate across others, amplifying uncertainty and reducing the effectiveness of traditional statecraft (p. 27). In the absence of reliable communication and verification mechanisms, even defensive measures can be interpreted as hostile, reinforcing adversarial perceptions and contributing to a continuous escalation spiral. In sum, the escalation of the U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation is driven by the interaction of incompatible strategic objectives, cycles of retaliation, the expansion of proxy warfare, domestic political constraints, and systemic mistrust. These factors operate simultaneously and reinforce one another, creating a self-sustaining conflict dynamic that is difficult to reverse without significant shifts in incentives, perceptions, and institutional mechanisms for dialogue and negotiation.

Mechanisms Of Conflict Expansion

The expansion of the confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran beyond its initial boundaries can be understood through interconnected processes that allow a localized conflict to diffuse across regions, actors, and sectors of the global system. One of the primary mechanisms is the activation and diffusion of networked violence through aligned non-state actors. These actors, often operating with varying degrees of autonomy, enable indirect engagement between state adversaries while extending the geographic reach of hostilities. This diffusion is consistent with Mumford's argument that proxy relationships allow states to externalize conflict participation, thereby transforming localized disputes into multi-front confrontations that are harder to contain (Mumford, 2013, p. 15). As these actors engage in hostilities across different territories, incidents that may appear isolated are in fact interconnected components of a broader strategic contest, thereby expanding the spatial and operational boundaries of the conflict.

Another mechanism through which the conflict expands is the targeting and disruption of critical energy infrastructure and maritime routes that are essential to the functioning of the global economy.

The strategic significance of chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz lies in their role as conduits for a substantial portion of global oil trade. Disruptions in these areas not only affect the immediate parties involved but also generate ripple effects across international markets. As Yergin (2006) notes, control over energy flows has historically been a central dimension of geopolitical competition, with interruptions capable of producing widespread economic consequences that extend far beyond the conflict zone (p. 233). In this context, attacks or threats to energy infrastructure function as both tactical tools and strategic signals, but they also inadvertently internationalize the conflict by involving energy-dependent states and global markets in its consequences.

The expansion of conflict is also facilitated by the interconnected nature of modern economic and political systems, where instability in one region can rapidly propagate through global networks of trade, finance, and supply chains. Keohane and Nye (1977) describe this condition as complex interdependence, in which states

and societies are linked through multiple channels that make them mutually sensitive to disruptions in critical sectors (p. 25). Within such a system, military escalation in one region can lead to cascading economic effects, including fluctuations in commodity prices, inflationary pressures, and disruptions to industrial production. These indirect consequences draw additional actors into the conflict environment, not as belligerents, but as stakeholders affected by its outcomes. As a result, the conflict expands functionally, influencing policy decisions and strategic calculations in regions far removed from the original theater of war.

Another important mechanism of expansion lies in the role of signaling and strategic communication, which can unintentionally broaden the scope of conflict when messages are interpreted differently by various actors. In high-tension environments, military maneuvers, public statements, and limited strikes are often intended to convey deterrent signals. However, as Schelling (1966) explains, the effectiveness of such signaling depends heavily on clarity, credibility, and shared understanding between adversaries (p. 37). When ambiguity or misinterpretation occurs, signals that are meant to deter can instead provoke countermeasures, leading to escalation across additional domains. In this way, signaling failures contribute to the widening of the conflict by encouraging preemptive or defensive actions that involve new actors or territories.

The expansion of conflict is further reinforced by the fragmentation of authority and the multiplicity of actors involved in decision-making processes. In contemporary conflicts, particularly those involving hybrid warfare, control over escalation is not always centralized. Instead, multiple actors with varying levels of autonomy may initiate actions that have broader strategic implications. This fragmentation reduces the ability of central authorities to fully regulate the pace and scope of conflict expansion. Kriesberg (2012) emphasizes that escalation is often cumulative, with localized actions accumulating into broader patterns of intensified conflict that are difficult to reverse once multiple actors become engaged (p. 152). As additional stakeholders enter the conflict environment—whether through direct involvement, alliance commitments, or defensive posturing—the conflict transitions from a bilateral or trilateral confrontation into a more complex and interconnected system.

In sum, the expansion of the U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation is driven by the diffusion of proxy engagements, the strategic targeting of energy infrastructure, the interconnectedness of global economic systems, the ambiguity of strategic signaling, and the fragmentation of authority among multiple actors. These mechanisms operate simultaneously to transform a regional confrontation into a broader geopolitical crisis, demonstrating how modern conflicts are no longer confined to clearly defined battlefields but instead evolve through networks of interaction that extend across regions and sectors of the global order.

Challenges To De-Escalation

The prospects for de-escalation in the confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran are constrained by a range of structural, political, and psychological barriers that make sustained conflict reduction difficult to achieve. One of the most significant challenges is the erosion of trust among the parties, which undermines the credibility of any proposed agreements or commitments. In environments characterized by prolonged hostility, each side tends to interpret the intentions of the other through a lens of suspicion, leading to defensive postures that are difficult to reverse. As Jervis (1978) explains, mutual distrust intensifies the security dilemma, where actions intended to enhance security are perceived as threats, thereby reinforcing adversarial behavior rather than alleviating it (p. 172). In such contexts, even minor concessions may be viewed as strategic deception rather than genuine moves toward peace.

Another major obstacle to de-escalation lies in the presence of credibility constraints and commitment problems. Actors engaged in conflict often fear that any agreement reached today may not be honored in the future, particularly in the absence of strong enforcement mechanisms. This concern is amplified in asymmetric conflicts where power dynamics and strategic interests shift over time. Schelling (1966) highlights that credible commitments are central to negotiation processes, yet in high-conflict environments, the inability to guarantee compliance reduces the willingness of parties to engage in meaningful concessions (p. 45). As a result, actors may prefer to continue confrontation rather than risk being exploited by an adversary who could defect from an agreement.

Domestic political pressures further complicate efforts at de-escalation. Leaders must navigate internal political landscapes in which public opinion, institutional actors, and elite interests can constrain foreign policy decisions. In such environments, demonstrating firmness and resilience often carries political rewards, while compromise may be interpreted as weakness or capitulation. This dynamic creates what can be described as a “credibility trap,” where leaders are incentivized to maintain or escalate conflict to preserve domestic legitimacy. Kriesberg (2012) notes that escalation is frequently sustained not only by external threats but also by internal dynamics that reward confrontational strategies over conciliatory ones (p. 158). Consequently, even when opportunities for negotiation arise, domestic constraints may limit the political feasibility of pursuing them.

Uncertainty and misperception also represent critical barriers to de-escalation. In highly volatile environments, actors often operate with incomplete or distorted information about the intentions, capabilities, and thresholds of their adversaries. This uncertainty increases the risk of miscalculation, where actions intended as defensive measures are interpreted as offensive provocations. Jervis (1978) argues that misperception is a persistent feature of international conflict, particularly when communication channels are weak or ambiguous (p. 173). In the absence of reliable information, actors may adopt worst-case assumptions, leading to cautious or preemptive strategies that perpetuate conflict rather than resolve it.

Finally, the fragmentation of authority and the multiplicity of actors involved in the conflict further hinder coordinated de-escalation efforts. The involvement of state and non-state actors, each with their own agendas and degrees of autonomy, complicates the negotiation landscape. Agreements reached between primary state actors may not automatically translate into compliance by affiliated groups or proxies, thereby limiting the effectiveness of formal diplomatic arrangements. Mumford (2013) emphasizes that proxy warfare introduces layers of complexity that reduce centralized control over conflict dynamics, making it difficult to implement comprehensive de-escalation strategies (p. 18). As a result, even when high-level political agreements are achieved, their practical enforcement across multiple actors remains uncertain.

De-Escalation Pathways

Despite the significant challenges outlined above, several pathways exist that may facilitate de-escalation in the ongoing confrontation. One of the most viable approaches involves the use of third-party mediation to bridge communication gaps between adversarial parties. Neutral actors, whether individual states or international organizations, can provide platforms for dialogue that reduce direct confrontation and enable the exchange of proposals in a less adversarial environment. Zartman (2001) argues that mediation is most effective when conflicts reach a mutually hurting stalemate, where parties recognize that continued escalation is more costly than negotiation (p. 9). In such situations, third-party facilitation can help translate shared recognition of costs into concrete diplomatic engagement.

Another important pathway involves the implementation of confidence-building measures designed to reduce uncertainty and foster incremental trust between parties. These measures may include limited ceasefires, communication hotlines, transparency initiatives, and verification mechanisms that allow each side to monitor the behavior of the other. By reducing ambiguity and demonstrating compliance in small but verifiable steps, confidence-building measures can gradually shift perceptions and create conditions conducive to more substantive negotiations. Kriesberg (2012) emphasizes that de-escalation is often a gradual process that requires sustained interaction and the accumulation of trust over time (p. 160).

Backchannel diplomacy represents an additional mechanism for de-escalation, particularly in situations where public negotiations are politically sensitive or constrained by domestic considerations. Informal and confidential communication channels allow parties to explore potential compromises without the pressure of public scrutiny. These backchannel engagements can help clarify intentions, test proposals, and identify areas of mutual interest that may not be immediately apparent in formal diplomatic settings. Schelling (1966) highlights the importance of communication in strategic interactions, noting that even indirect or informal signals can play a critical role in shaping expectations and reducing uncertainty (p. 52). Phased de-escalation strategies also offer a practical framework for reducing conflict intensity over time. Rather than attempting to resolve all contentious issues simultaneously, parties can adopt incremental agreements that address specific

areas of concern in stages. This approach allows for partial cooperation while maintaining flexibility to adjust commitments as trust develops. In complex conflicts, where comprehensive agreements may be difficult to achieve in the short term, phased strategies provide a realistic pathway for gradually reducing tensions and building momentum toward broader settlement.

Finally, the establishment of broader regional security arrangements can contribute to long-term stability by creating institutional mechanisms for dialogue, dispute resolution, and collective security. Such frameworks may involve multilateral participation and the development of norms that regulate state behavior within the region. While the creation of such arrangements requires significant political will and coordination, Keohane and Nye (1977) argue that in interdependent systems, institutional cooperation can help manage conflicts by providing structured channels for interaction and reducing the likelihood of unilateral escalation (p. 29). Over time, these institutions can serve as stabilizing forces that mitigate the risk of future conflicts escalating into large-scale crises.

Alternative Interpretations And Counterfactual Analysis

While this study emphasizes deterrence failure, escalation dynamics, and proxy warfare as primary explanatory factors, alternative interpretations warrant consideration. One competing perspective suggests that escalation may not solely reflect strategic miscalculation but may instead represent a deliberate strategy of coercive signaling. From this viewpoint, military actions and limited retaliatory strikes are intended to communicate resolve and establish bargaining leverage rather than initiate large-scale war. Escalation therefore functions as a calculated political instrument rather than an unintended outcome of failed deterrence. A second interpretation emphasizes domestic political incentives. Political leaders may adopt confrontational policies not primarily because of external security threats but because such actions strengthen domestic legitimacy, consolidate political support, or divert attention from internal challenges. Under this explanation, escalation is driven as much by internal political calculations as by interstate strategic competition.

Counterfactual analysis further illuminates the dynamics of the conflict. One plausible counterfactual scenario concerns the existence of effective diplomatic communication channels during the early stages of the confrontation. Had credible backchannel mechanisms remained active, opportunities for clarification of intentions and crisis management may have reduced the likelihood of retaliatory escalation. Similarly, the preservation of broader regional security arrangements or confidence-building measures could have limited the expansion of proxy engagements and prevented the diffusion of hostilities across multiple theaters. Another counterfactual scenario considers the role of energy infrastructure. Had maritime routes and strategic energy chokepoints remained insulated from military threats, the global economic consequences of the conflict would likely have been significantly reduced. Under such circumstances, the confrontation may have remained largely regional rather than developing into a broader international crisis.

These alternative interpretations and counterfactual scenarios do not invalidate the study's central argument. Rather, they strengthen the analysis by acknowledging multiple causal pathways and reducing the risk of explanatory bias. They also highlight the importance of diplomacy, communication, and institutional mechanisms in shaping escalation outcomes.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the U.S.–Israel–Iran confrontation serves as a critical case study in understanding the dynamics of modern escalation and the challenges of conflict management in a complex international system. The conflict underscores the need for adaptive, multi-level approaches that integrate political, economic, and security considerations while accounting for the roles of both state and non-state actors. Without effective mechanisms to manage escalation and facilitate dialogue, such conflicts risk evolving into protracted crises with far-reaching humanitarian, economic, and geopolitical consequences. Strengthening diplomatic institutions, improving communication channels, and fostering cooperative security arrangements are therefore essential steps toward mitigating the risks associated with similar conflicts in the future.

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