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FUTURE TRAJECTORIES OF THE IRAN–ISRAEL BALANCE OF THREAT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT TRANSFORMATIONS

TRAJETÓRIAS FUTURAS DO EQUILÍBRIO DE AMEAÇAS ENTRE O IRÃO E ISRAEL NO CONTEXTO DAS TRANSFORMAÇÕES DOS CONFLITOS CONTEMPORÂNEOS

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Abstract
This study examines the future trajectories of the threat balance between Iran and Israel against the backdrop of contemporary conflict transformations in the Middle East, drawing on the Balance of Threat Theory as an explanatory framework that transcends traditional balance-of-power logic. The study proceeds from the premise that the conflict is managed within a complex engagement environment in which indirect confrontation, multi-arena dynamics, and an expanded role for non-state actors intersect, rendering deterrence and rules of engagement subject to continuous recalibration. It employs two principal drivers: the nature of the American position—whether supportive of Israeli operations or restraining—and the extent to which Iran and Israel resort to direct use of force versus self-restraint. In light of these drivers, the study proposes three plausible trajectories: Equilibrium Stability, based on controlled mutual deterrence; Equilibrium Adjustment, through calculated escalation to recalibrate the threat balance; and Equilibrium Drift toward a broad comprehensive confrontation. The study concludes that Equilibrium Adjustment is the most likely trajectory in the near-to-medium term, while Equilibrium Stability remains contingent on the persistence of escalation brakes, and

Resumo
Este estudo examina as trajetórias futuras do equilíbrio de ameaças entre o Irão e Israel no contexto das transformações contemporâneas dos conflitos no Médio Oriente, recorrendo à Teoria do Equilíbrio de Ameaças como um quadro explicativo que transcende a lógica tradicional do equilíbrio de poder. O estudo parte da premissa de que o conflito é gerido num ambiente complexo de envolvimento, no qual se cruzam o confronto indireto, a dinâmica multiarena e um papel ampliado para os atores não estatais, tornando a dissuasão e as regras de envolvimento sujeitas a uma recalibração contínua. Ele emprega dois fatores principais: a natureza da posição americana — seja ela de apoio às operações israelenses ou de restrição — e a medida em que o Irão e Israel recorrem ao uso direto da força em vez da autocontenção. À luz destes fatores, o estudo propõe três trajetórias plausíveis: Estabilidade de Equilíbrio, baseada na dissuasão mútua controlada; Ajustamento de Equilíbrio, através de uma escalada calculada para recalibrar o equilíbrio de ameaças; e Deriva de Equilíbrio em direção a um confronto abrangente e generalizado. O estudo conclui que o Ajustamento do Equilíbrio é a trajetória mais provável no curto a médio prazo, enquanto a Estabilidade do Equilíbrio continua dependente

comprehensive Equilibrium Drift remains a limited but real possibility given the fragility of the regional environment.

Keywords: Threat Balance. Deterrence. Conflict. Iran. Israel. Future Trajectories.

da persistência dos freios à escalada, e o Desvio do Equilíbrio abrangente continua sendo uma possibilidade limitada, mas real, dada a fragilidade do ambiente regional.

Palavras-chave: *Equilíbrio de Ameaças. Dissuasão. Conflito. Irão. Israel. Trajetórias Futuras.*

1 INTRODUCTION

Contemporary conflict transformations in the Middle East have acquired a compound character that limits the utility of interpreting regional rivalry solely through the prism of hard balance-of-power logic. This is evident in the structure of engagement between Iran and Israel, where the conflict is no longer governed exclusively by disparities in conventional military capabilities; rather, it is reproduced through the dynamics of threat perception, evolving assessments of intent, multi-arena confrontations, and the expanding role of non-state actors, rendering rules of engagement subject to continuous revision. In this context, 'balance of threat' is advanced as a more suitable explanatory entry point for reading conflict trajectories, because it focuses on perceived threat—not raw power—as the primary determinant of actors' behavior, balancing patterns, and alliance choices (Saleh, 2024, p. 511).

This study proceeds from a general methodological hypothesis: that the future of the threat balance between Iran and Israel is taking shape as graduated trajectories rather than categorical outcomes, and that the boundaries between them are fluid and penetrable by a single pivotal event. To discipline the forecasting exercise, the study employs two explanatory drivers: first, the nature of the American position toward Israeli operations against Iran—whether supportive or restraining—as a force multiplier or brake on escalation; second, the level of direct offensive engagement by Iran and Israel versus their preference for indirect engagement and self-restraint (Muhammad, 2023, p. 18).

The study's research problem lies in the fact that the erosion of traditional rules of engagement and the broadening of grey zones—from precision strikes and shadow warfare to the cyber domain and multi-front operations—makes it difficult to assess

whether the deterrence equation can be consolidated, whether it is entering a phase of escalatory recalibration, or whether it is drifting toward a transformative slide into wide-scale confrontation. The central research question is: What are the probable future trajectories of the threat balance between Iran and Israel in light of contemporary conflict transformations, and how are transition dynamics between these trajectories determined? Subsidiary questions include: How does fluctuation in the American position shape the limits of deterrence? What is the impact of nuclear/missile program advances and multi-arena dynamics on altering escalation thresholds? And how do supporting non-state actors either consolidate or erode deterrence (Mahmoudian, 2024, pp. 7–8)?

To translate forecasting into an analytically testable framework, the study proposes three explanatory hypotheses. First, that high levels of American conflict management and both parties' preference for avoiding the existential cost of total war favor the Equilibrium Stability trajectory. Second, that Iran's approach toward a critical threshold in nuclear/missile capabilities—combined with deepening strikes and red-line erosion—pushes toward Equilibrium Adjustment via calculated escalation to recalibrate the threat balance without breaking it. Third, that declining external control, or the occurrence of a qualitative high-casualty event, combined with widening arena overlap, raises the probability of Equilibrium Drift toward a wide multi-front confrontation (Maher, 2023, pp. 232–234).

The study aims to build an explanatory framework for forecasting the threat balance between Iran and Israel drawing on Stephen Walt's theory, to analyze the transition dynamics between the three trajectories and the conditions favoring each, and to extract the strategic implications for regional stability and the limits of deterrence. Methodologically, it employs strategic analysis and futures forecasting within a qualitative framework, and is organized around three sections corresponding to the three trajectories, concluding with findings that specify the conditions favoring each trajectory and the possibilities of transition among them.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: BALANCE OF THREAT THEORY

Stephen Walt first articulated the idea of balance of threat in his 1985 article 'Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power,' published in *International*

Security, and subsequently elaborated it in his 1987 book *The Origins of Alliances* (Walt, 1985, pp. 8–9; Walt, 1990, p. 17).

According to Balance of Threat Theory, power does not represent the sole basis for constructing a balance of power; rather, threat and its perception constitute the primary determinant of states' behavior and alliances. Walt argues that states generally balance against perceived threat when certain parties or alliances pose an exceptional danger, and that the perception of aggressive intentions is a fundamental foundation for threat balancing. To illustrate: if states were concerned solely with power, Western Europe's postwar predominance should have driven Western European states to ally with the Soviet Union against the United States (Walt, 2002, pp. 133–134).

Balancing behavior in the global strategic environment does not necessarily reflect dominant powers with massive military capabilities; it clearly reflects the existence of threatening powers. Walt argues that a state's threat perception motivates its felt need to balance—threat may come not from the most powerful actors, but from the most dangerous parties who possess aggressive intentions, even if less powerful. This explains the absence of military alliances against the United States despite it being the world's greatest power, while an international coalition formed against the Islamic State, a sub-state actor, because it posed a direct threat to international security (Hamid, 2021, p. 159).

Powers in the global strategic environment choose alliances to confront threats they face, not to redistribute power. Power is merely one of the factors that generate threats, and a threat need not be actual for threat-balancing behavior to occur; it suffices that the perception and conception of threat takes shape. On the basis of this perception, a defensive reaction follows in the direction of the state's pursuit of balance against the party constituting a threat (Walt, 1988, p. 279).

Balancing against threat is achieved either through internal balancing—by which the state maximizes its own power and capabilities—or through external balancing—by entering into a counter-alliance. Threat perception is determined by indicators encompassing offensive power and aggressive intentions, as well as geographic proximity; closer states pose a greater threat, intensifying as their material power increases (Walt, 1990, p. 17).

Walt distinguished between balancing (allying against the threat) and bandwagoning (joining the source of the threat), emphasizing that when states feel

threatened they will balance through a counter-alliance, because joining the weaker side provides greater strategic advantages. Balancing enhances the state's power in confronting the threat, while bandwagoning constrains the state and exposes it to humiliation (Musa, 2020, p. 43).

This idea proceeds from the premise that if balancing is more common than bandwagoning, the strategic environment is more secure because the aggressor will face combined opposition; but if bandwagoning prevails, security will be scarce because aggressors' victories attract additional allies. Accordingly, balancing is defined as 'a compensatory strategy for states designed to confront an external threat as perceived by the decision-maker, through which the state aims to limit that threat and pursue security'—making Balance of Threat Theory a component of defensive realism (Abu Zaid, 2018, p. 36).

Consequently, balance within Balance of Threat Theory cannot be restricted to hard military threats alone. Other types of threats must not be overlooked, including soft threats such as instability within certain states, which can constitute a vital threat to the national security of adjacent states, motivating them to balance against such threats—as in the case of Yemen. Balance is accordingly achieved when the following conditions are present:

1. The existence of an external security threat to the vital interests of the state.
2. The existence of perception and conception of this threat on the part of the decision-maker.
3. The availability of motivating incentives for alliance formation and success, such as aggressive intentions and geographic proximity.
4. The alliance is directed against the party constituting the source of the threat, through adopting a balancing strategy rather than bandwagoning with the most threatening party.

3 FIRST SECTION: THE EQUILIBRIUM STABILITY TRAJECTORY

Consolidating Controlled Mutual Deterrence

3.1 Strategic description of the trajectory

The Equilibrium Stability trajectory rests on consolidating a state of relatively controlled mutual deterrence within a dynamic equation in which each party perceives the other's capacity to inflict strategic harm that is difficult to rapidly contain. Israel possesses an ambiguous nuclear deterrence umbrella, precision strike capabilities, qualitative and intelligence superiority, along with advanced cyber and AI capabilities. Iran relies on a vast network of regional supporting non-state actors as rings of indirect deterrence, advanced ballistic missile systems capable of carrying nuclear warheads, and drone and cyber warfare capabilities enabling it to reach deep into Israel. This mutual equation drives both parties to adopt a pattern of 'hostility coexistence with controlled escalation,' based on rules of engagement that do not cross acknowledged red lines according to the logic of brinkmanship risk management (Khalil & Abbas, 2025, pp. 7–12).

Within this trajectory, the following patterns are observable (Mahmoudian, 2024, pp. 7–8):

1. Maintaining a minimum of strategic deterrence through advanced missile, air, and offensive readiness on both sides—particularly Iran, which intensifies efforts to acquire air defense systems and advanced fighters from Russia and China, not necessarily in preparation for imminent war, but to significantly raise the cost of any potential Israeli or American strike against vital Iranian assets.
2. Iran's reliance on armed non-state actors as a strategic option to escalate hostilities without engaging in direct confrontation with Israeli forces—through incentivizing these actors to intensify offensive activities against American and Israeli interests, producing a sustained level of disruption and pressure throughout the region. This approach aims to complicate any direct response by the United States and Israel while serving as a means for Iran to assert influence indirectly while avoiding the direct costs of war.

3. Resorting to limited, highly precise, coordinated indirect strikes as a tool for resetting rules of engagement without sliding into total war. Israel may initiate preemptive strikes targeting Iranian bases and infrastructure in its areas of regional influence; conversely, Iran may escalate through maritime operations in the Arabian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean targeting shipping lanes to disrupt economic activity and signal its readiness to widen the conflict if necessary.
4. Managing escalation levels through quiet channels and signals sent through military maneuvers, capability deployments, and naval and air movements.

These mechanisms produce a mutual deterrence structure of a relative and unstable nature, susceptible to dissolution under escalation dynamics (Khalil & Abbas, 2025, p. 12). It rests on a mixture of deterrence-by-denial—in which Israel relies on multi-layered defensive networks against Iran's vast strategic depth—and deterrence-by-punishment, on which Iran relies through long-range missile systems and regional support networks against Israel's qualitative offensive air superiority. As long as this equation remains effective, the probability of full-scale war falls to low levels, while shadow warfare and mutual attrition operations continue within calculated limits that do not exceed strategic explosion thresholds (Eisenstadt, 2024; Ghadban, 2025, pp. 207–209; Al-Saidi, 2025, pp. 1–5).

3.2 Dynamics of equilibrium stability

This trajectory reflects the reality of the period preceding the attack of 7 October 2023 and the period following the missile exchanges from April through early June 2024. Its features began to take shape since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, when Iran embarked on supporting Assad's regime through direct Hezbollah military involvement, deployment of IRGC advisers, and cross-border mobilization of armed factions. After 2015, Iran expanded its military, social, and political presence inside Syria, secured a sustainable supply line to Hezbollah, and entrenched an influence structure enabling it to affect regional deterrence equations (Ahmadian & Mohseni, 2021, pp. 244–254).

Against this backdrop, Israel consistently sought to weaken the Iranian-linked military infrastructure by conducting repeated air strikes targeting supply depots, training

sites, and weapons convoys. These factors collectively entrenched what resembled a pattern of 'ongoing game': Iran continuing to expand its military presence despite losses, while Israel pursued periodic targeting to undermine those structures. Prior to October 7th, Israel was not directly targeting senior Iranian officers; conversely, Iranian behavior was characterized by a clear tendency to avoid direct retaliation while relying on supporting actors to deliver limited responses of deterrent and symbolic significance rather than decisive operational effect (van Veen & Touval, 2024, p. 5).

Cyber attacks constituted one of the most prominent forms of military friction within this trajectory, reflecting a shift from traditional operational arenas to high-precision cyber warfare providing mutual strategic effects for threat balancing without reaching full escalation (Amaliya, 2025, pp. 51–53):

1. The 'Stuxnet' attack, revealed in 2010, targeted more than 15 Iranian facilities, including the Natanz nuclear facility where a significant number of centrifuges were disabled.
2. In 2011, Iran conducted a cyber counter-operation against Israel using counterfeit software exploiting fake virtual identities of government officials and journalists, infiltrating more than 2,000 computers and breaching several government agencies.
3. On 9 May 2020, Israel launched a cyber attack on Iran's Shahid Rajaee Port at Bandar Abbas, causing shipping disruptions, in retaliation for an Iranian cyber attack on Israel's water and sanitation infrastructure.
4. After 7 October 2023, Iran conducted a series of cyber attacks against Israel targeting radar systems and cybersecurity infrastructure, alongside social engineering operations including impersonation accounts designed to destabilize Israeli public opinion regarding the hostage crisis.

In summary, this trajectory manifests as an indirect military confrontation taking the form of qualitative, low-frequency strikes primarily in the Syrian theater and—to a lesser extent—Lebanon and Iraq, alongside extensive mutual cyber targeting. Israeli military planners have expressed this pattern within the conceptual framework of the 'Campaign Between Wars,' a designation that accurately encapsulates the underlying stakes: both parties retain the right to continue military activity within a ceiling perceived

by the other, creating a grey zone in which coercive intervention does not necessarily lead to broad escalation, nor remains without response (Shelah & Valensi, 2023, p. 32).

3.3 Escalation control factors and potential disruptors

Escalation Control Factors:

- Internal fragility in Iran: Protest waves, growing corruption, and economic deterioration reduce the regime's appetite for strategic risk-taking and capacity to bear consequences of broad escalation, driving more cautious engagement management. (Khalil & Abbas, 2025, p. 10)
- Political and social pressures in Israel: Internal crises—protests against judicial reforms, criticism of war management, disagreement over Haredi conscription—narrow leadership's room for maneuver and raise the political cost of escalatory decisions, reinforcing the inclination toward strategic control. (Mahmoudian, 2024, p. 8)

Potential Disruptors of Rules of Engagement:

- Accelerating development of the Iranian nuclear program: Iran's approach toward military nuclear capabilities may represent an inflection point in Israeli deterrence calculations, opening the door to more assertive options including limited or broad preemptive operations.
- High-sensitivity casualty strikes: Operations resulting—even unintentionally—in the deaths of American soldiers, Israeli civilians, or international nationals may push parties beyond their absorption capacity toward retaliatory responses that exceed traditional control limits.
- Revisability of red lines: The nature of red lines in this trajectory is flexible and context-dependent, making any tactical incident susceptible to transformation into a strategic crisis, opening the possibility of sliding toward limited confrontation or greater escalation.
- Impact of regional environment and multi-arena dynamics: The overlap of engagement arenas—from Syria and Lebanon to Iraq and the Red Sea—makes the trajectory more fragile, as a single error on one front can produce wide

reverberations across remaining arenas and disrupt the escalation control architecture.

4 SECOND SECTION: THE EQUILIBRIUM ADJUSTMENT TRAJECTORY

Calculated Escalation to Recalibrate the Threat Balance

4.1 Strategic description of the trajectory

After the exhaustion of other conventional strategies, the Equilibrium Adjustment trajectory represents a situation in which both Iran and Israel move toward employing strategic escalation as a tool for recalibrating the threat balance, within a context characterized by the erosion of traditional rules of engagement and mounting pressure on mutual deterrence systems. This trajectory rests on the premise that the existing deterrence is no longer sufficient to guarantee Israeli national security, particularly given Iran's approach toward 'nuclear breakthrough.' Accordingly, maintaining the balance equation may push Israel—with American assistance—to adopt some form of preventive military action against Iranian nuclear infrastructure through deliberate, calculated direct strikes with defined operational objectives (Maher, 2023, pp. 232–234). This escalation takes a coded kinetic character executed through multiple instruments (Mahmoudian, 2024, pp. 8–9):

1. Precision air and missile strikes against qualitative nodes encompassing air defense systems, command and intelligence facilities, and sensitive nuclear assets, aimed at weakening the other party's operational superiority without widening the scope of confrontation.
2. Low-frequency but high-significance cross-border attacks, such as targeting military bases, naval and commercial vessels, industrial projects, and critical infrastructure.
3. Full-capacity proxy war, whereby Iran may decide to escalate indirectly by pushing Hezbollah into a wide confrontation with Israel. The Iranian strategic calculation rests on the premise that inflicting heavy costs on Israel through a

prolonged high-intensity conflict—even if Israel emerges victorious—would deter it from future aggressive actions against Iranian interests.

By this logic, the goal of these operations is not to achieve decisive victory or radical change in the power equation, but to recalibrate the threat index in ways that push the adversary to reconsider its calculations, redefine its red lines, and retreat from orientations perceived as structural imbalances in the deterrence equilibrium.

4.2 Dynamics of equilibrium adjustment

The Equilibrium Adjustment trajectory embodies the dynamics of escalating strategic interaction between Iran and Israel since the outbreak of the Israeli campaign on Gaza on 7 October 2023, through the Twelve-Day War in June 2025. The most prominent dynamics of this interaction can be identified as follows:

4.2.1 Sequential iranian activation of 'axis of resistance' elements

In response to the Israeli campaign on Gaza, the axis witnessed a series of graduated escalatory interactions. Hezbollah's cross-border strikes multiplied and exceeded previous red lines, with attack scope widening to reach 20–30 kilometers beyond the border and collateral damage to civilian facilities increasing. The Houthi movement then followed, targeting Red Sea shipping lanes and the Port of Eilat, imposing direct economic burdens on Israel and contributing to the internationalization of the conflict. Iran's objective was to gradually exhaust Israel through multiplying pressure fronts, while Israel sought to halt attacks from multiple directions through faster and stricter retaliatory responses. Israel thus found itself in a multi-front confrontation receiving limited damage from three axes: the Houthis from the south (most intense), Hezbollah from the north (most dangerous), and Iran-linked elements in Syria from the east (most volatile), while Iran itself remained at the margins of direct engagement (van Veen & Touval, 2024, pp. 5–6).

4.2.2 Limited direct war between the parties

The direct confrontation trajectory escalated when Israel struck the Iranian consulate in Damascus on 1 April 2024, killing a number of senior IRGC officers. Iran responded on 14 April with a large-scale attack using approximately 300 missiles and drones; however, the attack caused minimal damage after Israeli and American air defense systems successfully intercepted the bulk of projectiles. Israel then conducted precision strikes on 19 April targeting three Iranian air defense sites. Iran continued escalating on 1 October with an intensive ballistic missile attack using at least 180 missiles—registering a much lower interception rate, causing damage whose details were not officially disclosed. In response, Israel launched strikes on 26 October targeting approximately 20 Iranian military sites. Additionally, Israel killed Hamas and Hezbollah leadership and destroyed large portions of their arsenals and command structures, sustaining this cycle of limited direct escalation within bounds below the threshold of total war (Fraioli, 2024, pp. 1–3).

4.2.3 Israeli preemptive campaign to dismantle iranian threat systems

With the contraction of Iranian air defenses following the dismantlement of Hezbollah's military capabilities, the collapse of the Syrian regime, and augmented US-Israeli defensive missile cooperation, an unprecedented operational window opened for Israel to act against Iranian strategic assets. The decisive impetus was the conspicuous acceleration of Iranian nuclear and ballistic programs, which redefined the threat level and raised the need for a direct preemptive initiative (Wald et al., 2025, pp. 17–18):

a. Nuclear Progress: In early 2025, American intelligence assessed that Iran was pursuing a testable and deployable nuclear weapon. Following Israel's response to Iran's October 2024 ballistic attack, this work appeared to have accelerated. Israeli intelligence officials indicated that elements within Iran's nuclear weapons group had begun exploring ways to approach the capability to assemble a functional nuclear device. Iran's program had become so advanced and opaque that Israel judged it could not risk discovering Iran's 'zero hour' for assembling a bomb, nor

could it miss the qualitative operational window provided by the recent dismantlement of Iranian support structures and air defense systems.

b. Accelerated Ballistic Missile Production: Iran moved swiftly to expand production of medium-range ballistic missiles with the aim of manufacturing more than 1,000 missiles annually—enabling it to triple its total missile inventory to approximately 8,000 missiles within two years—while seeking to improve munitions precision to approximately five meters. As the October 2024 attack demonstrated, these missiles constituted a threat of enormous strategic significance, necessitating preemptive measures even without simultaneous nuclear program acceleration.

c. Threat of Iranian Preemptive Strike: Israeli intelligence assessments indicated that Iranian leadership—aware of its operational vulnerability—had begun seriously discussing a preemptive strike option, with preliminary operational plans envisaging the launch of 700–1,000 ballistic missiles at Israel—more than three times the October 2024 attack. This volume of fire represented a capacity capable of overwhelming even the most advanced joint Israeli-American defense systems and would have constrained the IDF's offensive maneuverability.

Faced with this accumulating threat and increasing operational urgency, Israel launched on 13 June 2025 Operation 'Rising Lion'—a large-scale strategic air campaign involving more than 200 combat aircraft including stealth F-35 fighters, targeting approximately 100 strategic sites including nuclear infrastructure at Natanz, Fordow, Parchin, and Arak, missile and drone production centers, and senior IRGC commanders. In response, Iran launched Operation 'True Promise 3,' firing more than 150 ballistic missiles and 100 drones, many penetrating Israeli and American defense systems and targeting Haifa and Tel Aviv. This escalation confirmed the conflict's transformation into a high-precision direct confrontation managed according to controlled strategic rules of engagement (Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2025, pp. 4–7).

Within this context, coordination between Israel and the US Central Command extended to offensive planning against Iran's strategic infrastructure. On 22 June, the United States executed Operation 'Midnight Hammer'—a massive air strike involving more than 125 aircraft, including seven B-2 stealth bombers—delivering 12 GBU-57 (MOP) bunker-busting bombs against Fordow and Natanz, immediately followed by more than 30 Tomahawk cruise missiles launched at Isfahan's nuclear site. In the

preceding days, Israel had destroyed large portions of Iran's western radar network and targeted multiple SAM systems, opening safe entry corridors for American bombers and disrupting Iranian air defense coordination (Wald et al., 2025, p. 32).

Consequently, Operations 'Rising Lion' and 'Midnight Hammer' produced deep strategic reverberations on the most threatening Iranian programs. Through precision strikes, advanced US-Israeli air and missile defense integration, intelligence dominance, and sustained air superiority, the campaign succeeded in weakening the strategic pillars of Iranian nuclear and ballistic capabilities and confirming the credibility of joint deterrence. While Israel was unable to completely eliminate these programs, it succeeded in setting them back by years, resetting the strategic threat level and reducing Iran's capacity to impose new deterrence equations in the foreseeable future (Wald et al., 2025, p. 33).

4.3 Constraints on the equilibrium adjustment trajectory

Despite the strategic attractiveness of this trajectory, its realization remains constrained by several brakes:

- Internal Political Constraints: Popular and economic pressures in both Israel and Iran—including public opinion, protests, and economic challenges—constitute a constraining factor on decision-makers' capacity to execute calculated escalation without facing internal criticism or losing the legitimacy of strategic decision-making.
- Risks of Losing Control over Regional Supporting Actors: The use of regional groups as escalation tools may expose both parties to the risk of operations transforming into an uncontrolled confrontation, especially if these actors exceed stipulated rules of engagement.
- Economic and Humanitarian Impact: Any limited escalation may entail tangible damage to infrastructure, the economy, and civil society, imposing pressures on leadership to restrict the scope of operations and limit strategic costs.
- International Interaction and Regional Effects: Interventions or positions from the United States, Russia, China, or regional actors limit freedom of movement and

impose constraints on strategic options, including the timing and pace of operations.

5 THIRD SECTION: THE EQUILIBRIUM DRIFT TRAJECTORY

Toward a Broad Comprehensive Confrontation

5.1 Strategic description of the trajectory

The Equilibrium Drift trajectory represents the maximum extreme of the escalation logic in the Iran–Israel conflict equation, in which confrontation transitions from managing the threat to dismantling it by force. In this framework, military use of force becomes an instrument for achieving radical change in the adversary's strategic structure, opening the door to a wide-scale transformative war. Escalation takes the form of simultaneous, intensive, multi-front operations aimed at toppling the adversary's political system through striking strategic centers of gravity and vital sovereign capabilities (Hassan, 2015, pp. 470–472).

This pattern of engagement moves beyond traditional deterrence toward a conflict theater built on the logic of 'threat eradication,' through striking military, security, and economic infrastructure and imposing functional collapse on the adversary's decision-making system. This confrontation expands horizontally across the region and spheres of influence, and vertically through the various domains and levels of conflict—cyber, missile, air, naval, and ground—making war dynamics accumulatively difficult to contain or re-regulate (Shaaban & Al-Sukkari, 2025, p. 10).

The transition of conflict to a high-intensity total war between Iran and Israel remains fundamentally conditioned on an active American military presence, driven by three principal determinants (Alifantis, 2025, pp. 5–7):

- First: The growing conviction that Iranian nuclear and missile capabilities, alongside its regional non-state support networks, have reached a critical threshold threatening to break the historical conflict balance and undermine the Israeli qualitative superiority equation in a manner difficult to contain by conventional means. (van Veen & Touval, 2024, p. 7)

- Second: The consolidation of the strategic perception that traditional deterrence systems have lost their relative effectiveness, after Iran demonstrated its capacity to absorb strikes and employ its missile capabilities and indirect regional support networks to impose unprecedented operational and strategic costs on Israel.
- Third: The occurrence of a qualitative regional variable—either Iran undertaking broad offensive operations without a direct strategic trigger, or an explicit declaration of intent to possess nuclear weapons, which would be considered a crossing of a strategic red line driving the conflict toward total confrontation.

Iran has in fact begun crystallizing its military approach in alignment with this possibility, resting on four fundamental pillars (Al-Ilyas, 2025, pp. 3–6):

1. Consolidating the Concept of Sacred Defense: Through invoking the military experience of the Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988), encompassing the mobilization of popular and strategic resources and projecting Iran's commitment to a long-term confrontation with Israel and the United States regardless of threats or potential losses.
2. Addressing the Strategic Structural Deficiency in Iranian Power: Iran seeks to close the gap revealed during the recent confrontation with Israel—the limitations of exclusive reliance on missile power. Iranian military doctrine is moving toward diversifying power instruments through activating air power and strengthening air defense systems, manifested in efforts to acquire Chinese Chengdu J-10 fighters, Russian MiG-29 and Su-35 fighters, and S-400 air defense systems.
3. Strengthening Electronic Warfare Capabilities: Iran is developing electronic warfare capabilities as a decisive pillar in any future confrontation, aimed at undermining Israeli offensive capabilities directed at critical infrastructure and nuclear facilities. These efforts encompass developing jamming capabilities, signal interception, disruptive cyber attacks, and cybersecurity systems.
4. Codifying Strategic Power in Operational Employment Mechanisms: Iran is working to reformulate its strategic power instrument employment methodology, transitioning from broad, unrestrained use to a codified model based on precise calculations of the war trajectory with Israel, reflecting an awareness that superiority will depend not solely on strike volume but on calculated management

of strategic resources to ensure sustainability, raise operational efficiency, and reduce exposure to attrition.

5.2 Strategic constraints on the trajectory

Although this trajectory remains a possible scenario given the fragility of the escalation environment, a set of structural and operational constraints makes the drift toward wide-scale war a limited and complex probability:

1. The growing American societal fatigue with military engagement in the Middle East, in light of the costly experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan and their resulting wide human and material losses—making any American administration more hesitant about sliding into a new war in the region. (Hassan, 2015, pp. 471–472)
2. Iran's possession of a solid geopolitical mass making the cost of war against it high and its outcomes uncertain: a state with a demographic depth exceeding eighty million, large geographic territory providing extensive defensive depth, an advanced military structure, and strategic interconnection with neighboring states providing additional operational margins in any wide military confrontation. (Rahim, 2024, p. 356)
3. Iran's probable response will carry broad regional dimensions, as the regional supporting actor network possesses the capacity to open multiple fronts against Israel simultaneously, including conducting qualitative attacks against American bases and forces in Iraq and reinforcing Hezbollah's positioning toward direct engagement. This geographic widening would produce widespread regional disruption, increase the cost of war, and complicate management options for the United States and Israel. (Rahim, 2024, p. 360)
4. The possibility that Iran, in a critical strategic situation, would disrupt navigation in the Strait of Hormuz—through which approximately 40% of global oil trade passes—producing sharp disruptions in energy markets, raising the strategic cost of war, and potentially activating broad international pressure driving toward restraining escalation. (van Veen & Touval, 2024, p. 8)
5. American preoccupation with major competitive theaters—particularly the strategic competition with China and the war in Ukraine—makes it unlikely to

possess the diplomatic and military capacity, or political will, to engage in an open confrontation on three fronts, reducing the probability of rushing toward broad war alongside Israel against Iran. (Mahmoudian, 2024, p. 9)

6. The probability of allied intervention, and the resulting broad regional disruption and global energy supply interruption, may necessitate an international movement—whether through the United Nations or through a coalition led by major powers—to recontain the situation and prevent its drift toward comprehensive regional war.

It is accordingly apparent that this trajectory represents the most dangerous conflict scenario, in which war is managed by the logic of 'threat decisiveness' rather than control or containment. Israel would move to transcend traditional rules of engagement through deep strikes and direct targeting of Iranian power structures; Iran would engage with the logic of 'survival war' through activating all response levels and widening the confrontation to the regional theater. The outbreak of total war would thus be a conflict over the strategic existence of both parties, making its outcomes transformative and transcending any attempt at re-regulation of the existing threat level.

6 CONCLUSION AND FINDINGS

This study concludes that the future of the threat balance between Iran and Israel is taking shape within a regional conflict environment characterized by a high degree of complexity and volatility, in which conflict is not managed according to the logic of 'military decisiveness' but within dynamic deterrence mechanisms oscillating between control, calibration, and unchecked escalation. The approach employed—derived from Balance of Threat Theory—has demonstrated that the parties' perceptions of threat nature and proximity, alongside assessments of aggressive intentions, multi-arena confrontations, and qualitative offensive capability development, constitute more decisive determinants of behavior than mere hard-power comparisons. The existing balance does not reflect permanent structural stability, but rests on continuous management of risk at the edge of escalation, making its future trajectories susceptible to rapid transformation through a qualitative event, miscalculation, or change in the level of external control.

In light of the analysis of the two principal conflict drivers, three interrelated trajectories emerge expressing graduated degrees of threat intensity rather than entirely separate conditions. The first trajectory, Equilibrium Stability, rests on consolidating controlled mutual deterrence, in which each party perceives that widening the confrontation will produce a strategic cost exceeding potential gains. This trajectory demonstrates that deterrence in the current regional environment is achievable—but it is a relative deterrence requiring the continuation of silent signaling channels and control, and remaining fragile before the dynamics of rule erosion and increasing miscalculation possibilities.

The second trajectory—Equilibrium Adjustment—represents the pattern most capable of realization in the near-to-medium term, because it embodies a rising trend toward using calculated escalation as a tool for recalibrating the threat balance without breaking it. In this framework, escalation is not understood as a necessary entry into total war, but as a form of rough strategic messaging aimed at adjusting the adversary's red lines and compelling it to reassess risks.

By contrast, the Equilibrium Drift trajectory remains the highest-risk and most transformative possibility in the conflict structure, in which confrontation transitions from managing the threat to attempting to dismantle it by force through broad multi-front, multi-domain operations raising the violence level to a threshold difficult to contain. Nevertheless, the study's findings indicate that this scenario remains contingent on exceptional circumstances—a qualitative variable directly violating strategic red lines, sensitive casualties pushing parties toward uncontrollable responses, or significant decline in the structural and political brakes constraining actors' capacity to wage a prolonged, high-cost war.

Based on the foregoing, the study's principal findings are:

1. The threat balance between Iran and Israel is characterized by a dynamic nature that derives its meaning not from the stability of outcomes, but from the parties' capacity to control escalation and redefine red lines on a recurring basis.
2. The American role generally functions as a force amplifier or brake on escalation, but is not the original driver of the conflict; the operational initiative of both confrontation parties remains the decisive factor in directing trajectories.

3. Multi-arena dynamics and the presence of supporting actors broaden the scope of threat and raise the cost of error; but simultaneously provide both parties with indirect escalation tools allowing violence management without immediate arrival at total confrontation.
4. Nuclear and missile advancement represents a pivotal variable in reproducing threat perception, and is one of the most prominent factors that may accelerate the transition from Equilibrium Stability to Equilibrium Adjustment, or push toward Equilibrium Drift when accompanied by events of sensitive strategic significance.
5. The most realistic trajectory is neither complete deterrence stillness nor comprehensive explosion, but rather the continuation of equilibrium calibration patterns and calculated escalation within a grey engagement environment—meaning the region remains in a state of chronic tension susceptible to renewal according to changes in contexts and triggering events.

In conclusion, this study affirms that understanding the future trajectories of the threat balance between Iran and Israel requires treating the conflict as a system of complex interactions managed through deterrence, coded escalation, and continuous threat reassessment, rather than as a linear confrontation with a single endpoint. Accordingly, the explanatory value of futures forecasting within the threat balance framework manifests in its capacity to specify the conditions favoring each trajectory and highlight inter-trajectory transition indicators, thereby contributing to a more disciplined reading of the future of strategic balances in the Middle East.

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All authors contributed equally to the development of this article.

Data availability

All datasets relevant to this study's findings are fully available within the article.

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