



GLOBAL EYE  
INTELLIGENCE

**ESCALATION**

**LADDER**

**THEORY**



# Introduction

As the international landscape becomes increasingly multipolar and complex, the dynamics of escalation in conflicts will also evolve. This report examines the intricate escalation ladder between Israel and Iran, highlighting how simultaneous strategies and shifting geographies influence their interactions. The ongoing rivalry between these two strategically sophisticated states exemplifies how capabilities and public rhetoric shape the nature of escalation.

# MULTIPOLAR





# *Escalation Dynamics*

The Iranian-Israeli escalation ladder is significantly affected by advancements in capabilities, particularly in Iran's nuclear and cyber weapons programs. These developments were initiated in response to perceived threats, particularly following Iran's inability to deter Iraqi chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. Today, Iran's nuclear ambitions are driven by the need to deter U.S. and Israeli actions, allowing it to conduct its conventional and proxy-centric operations in the region. Similarly, Iran's cyber capabilities were developed to establish credible deterrents against Israeli operations, especially after the Stuxnet cyber-sabotage attack in 2011.



The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has further complicated the Iranian-Israeli rivalry. The disintegration of state authority in Syria has created a unique environment for both Iranian and Israeli military operations. Iranian forces, deployed ostensibly to stabilize Syria, pose a direct threat to Israeli security by positioning missiles and drones within striking distance of Israel and securing supply lines to Hezbollah. Concurrently, the Israeli Air Force has conducted extensive operations against Iranian-affiliated forces, launching over 950 strikes from 2018 to 2021, effectively using its air power to maintain its strategic advantage.





## *Shifting Strategies*

The evolution of Israel's limited strike options against Iran underscores the complexities of the escalation ladder. Historically, Israel has relied on clear public rhetoric and military action to deter adversaries, as seen with the Begin Doctrine of 1981, which asserted Israel's commitment to prevent any enemy from developing weapons of mass destruction. This doctrine was reinforced by Israel's successful strikes on Iraqi and Syrian nuclear facilities in 1981 and 2007, respectively. These actions demonstrated Israel's capability to execute precise military strikes while also establishing a credible deterrent against future threats.

However, since the 2010s, Israel's ability to conduct similar strikes has diminished due to the fortification and dispersal of Iranian nuclear facilities. The decline in both capabilities and credible rhetoric has rendered the option of limited strikes ineffective, forcing Israel to explore alternative strategies, such as cyber-sabotage and targeted assassinations.



# *Complexity*

## *of Escalation Ladders*

The Israeli-Iranian case exemplifies the intricate nature of escalation ladders, influenced by concurrent strategies and dynamics. The development of Iran's nuclear capabilities, initially aimed at deterring Iraq, has inadvertently affected its relations with Israel. This interconnectedness illustrates the broader implications of escalation ladders, as states navigate a complex web of strategic choices in response to their adversaries.

# COMPLEXITIES



Herman Kahn's theory of escalation remains relevant, emphasizing that escalation occurs in defined steps rather than through a fluid spectrum or rigid dichotomy. Different capabilities and institutional structures underlie each step of the escalation ladder, with lower levels often relying on diplomatic and economic measures while higher levels necessitate military responses. Escalation dominance becomes a crucial consideration, wherein one state might hold an advantage in specific escalation segments, disincentivizing the other from engaging in those actions.

# HERMAN KAHN



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# Implications for Global Conflict Dynamics

The ongoing situation between Israel and Iran, along with the conflict in Ukraine, raises critical questions about the applicability of Kahn's framework in modern warfare. Kahn's model of escalation, characterized by incremental steps from disagreement to potential nuclear conflict, underscores the need for adaptation in the face of evolving geopolitical realities.

The Ukraine conflict, particularly Russia's actions, highlights how escalation behavior can align with Kahn's ladder, as seen in the systematic buildup to the invasion and the subsequent conventional warfare phase. The interplay of power dynamics, particularly Russia's near-monopoly on escalation, illustrates how a state's risk calculus can shape its approach to conflict and deterrence.





# Conclusion

The Israeli-Iranian rivalry represents a complex interplay of capabilities, public rhetoric, and regional dynamics that shape their escalation ladders. The increasing sophistication of both states and the changing nature of warfare necessitate a nuanced understanding of escalation theory. As states navigate these intricate landscapes, the need for effective crisis communication and diplomatic engagement becomes paramount to mitigate the risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation. Ultimately, a comprehensive framework for understanding escalation must account for the unique characteristics of each conflict, adapting Kahn's original model to reflect contemporary realities in global security.

# KAHN'S

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