

Policy Brief

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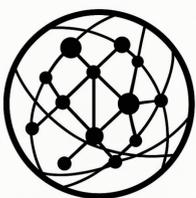
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Escalation Dynamics in IRGC's Operation True Promise: Interpreting the Conflict through an Escalation Ladder Framework

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Executive Summary

The confrontation associated with Operation True Promise has evolved from limited retaliatory exchanges into a structurally unstable multi-domain confrontation. While the conflict remains below the threshold of large-scale war, the operational pattern increasingly resembles a stepwise escalation ladder, in which successive phases broaden target sets, deepen operational coordination, and generate expanding geopolitical spillovers.

This policy brief proposes a nine-level escalation framework to interpret the trajectory of the conflict. Each level corresponds to distinct operational triggers, strategic meaning, and observable cost variables within the Middle East Conflict Cost Monitor (MCCM) model.

Current evidence suggests that the confrontation has moved beyond limited strike exchanges and now lies between Level 4 and Level 6, characterized by sustained missile-UAV exchanges, maritime spillover affecting global shipping routes and increasing operational coordination among allied forces.

If the erosion of engagement norms and systematic targeting of C4ISR infrastructure, the conflict could approach **Level 7**, where escalation becomes more volatile and politically difficult to contain.

The key strategic implication is that escalation risk in this conflict does not primarily stem from average strike intensity but from the **cumulative probability of threshold-crossing events** along the escalation ladder.

1. Analytical Framework: The Escalation Ladder

Modern regional conflicts often unfold through incremental escalation stages rather than immediate transitions to full-scale war. Each stage represents both a military threshold and a political signaling mechanism.

The proposed Operation True Promise Escalation Ladder identifies nine escalation levels.

Policy Brief

A. Level 0 — Shadow Competition

- **Trigger:**

- reconnaissance operations
- cyber operations
- sabotage and covert disruption
- information warfare

- **Strategic Meaning:**

Actions remain **plausibly deniable and politically controllable**, allowing both sides to test capabilities without formal escalation.

- **MCCM Variables:**

- Cyber/EW baseline activities
- typically not included in direct military cost calculations.

B. Level 1 — Limited Stand-off Strikes

- **Trigger:**

- small-scale air strikes
- drone attacks
- limited missile launches against avoidable targets

- **Strategic Meaning:**

This phase serves primarily as **probing behavior**, testing air defense performance and political tolerance thresholds.

- **MCCM Variables:**

- . Low interceptor burn rate
- . Limited strike packages

C. Level 2 — Sustained Missile-UAV Exchanges

- **Trigger:**

- repeated waves of ballistic missiles and UAV attacks
- prolonged strike cycles (e.g., Wave 10+ patterns)

- **Strategic Meaning:**

The confrontation shifts toward a **consumption-based attrition dynamic**, with continuous pressure on air defense networks and interceptor inventories.

- **MCCM Variables:**

- High interceptor burn rate
- Counter-UAS deployment expansion
- Inventory and supply pressure

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D. Level 3 — Base Area Targeting

- **Trigger:**
 - systematic targeting of base infrastructure;
 - radar systems, SATCOM nodes, antenna networks, and radomes.
- **Strategic Meaning:**

The operational objective shifts from simple damage infliction to **disrupting operational networks**, particularly C4ISR infrastructure.
- **MCCM Variables:**
 - C4ISR restoration cost;
 - redundancy activation;
 - operational latency penalties.

E. Level 4 — Maritime Spillover in Strategic Chokepoints

- **Trigger:**
 - merchant vessel damage in the **Strait of Hormuz or Gulf of Oman**;
 - convoy operations and naval escort missions;
 - escalation of maritime engagements.
- **Strategic Meaning:**

Conflict effects extend beyond the battlefield to **global economic networks**, particularly energy and maritime trade.
- **MCCM Variables:**
 - surge in **Global Shock indicators**;
 - war-risk insurance premiums;
 - shipping rerouting costs;
 - freight volatility.

F. Level 5 — Deep Strike on Strategic Nodes

- **Trigger:**
 - attacks on capital cities;
 - ministries of defense;
 - airports or strategic industrial facilities;
 - key command nodes.
- **Strategic Meaning:**

Strategic depth is breached, dramatically increasing **political escalation risks**.
- **MCCM Variables:**
 - Political Reaction Multiplier (PRM);
 - urban critical-node exposure.

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G. Level 6 — Joint Campaign Integration

- **Trigger:**

- explicit division of operational zones or target categories;
- establishment of coordination cells;
- large-scale air-refueling integration.

- **Strategic Meaning:**

Military operations transition from loose coordination to **integrated joint campaigns** involving allied support.

- **MCCM Variables:**

- U.S. enablement costs (tankers, ISR platforms);
- coordination efficiency gains;
- adversary counter-adaptation.

H. Level 7 — Rules and Norms Erosion

- **Trigger:**

- public declarations weakening engagement rules;
- expansion of permissible target categories.

- **Strategic Meaning:**

The erosion of operational norms increases **collateral damage risk** and narrows diplomatic exit options.

- **MCCM Variables:**

- collateral risk premium;
- escalation probability increases;
- higher volatility in global shock indicators.

I. Level 8 — Limited Ground Action

- **Trigger:**

- special forces incursions;
- short-duration ground operations;
- seizure or rescue of key assets.

- **Strategic Meaning:**

The threshold for ground engagement is crossed, increasing the probability of **irreversible escalation**.

- **MCCM Variables:**

- ground sustainment costs;
- casualty sensitivity multiplier.

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J. Level 9 — Large-scale Ground War

- **Trigger:**
 - major ground force deployment;
 - occupation or regime-change operations.

- **Strategic Meaning:**

The conflict becomes a **full-scale war**, with structural shifts in cost and political commitment.

- **MCCM Variables:**

- daily operational cost regime shifts;
- estimated **\$3–10 billion per day** expenditures;
- long-term fiscal shock.

2. Current Escalation Assessment

Based on available operational indicators, the conflict currently appears to fall within **Levels 4–6**. Key observable developments include:

- a) **Sustained missile exchanges.** Multiple waves of ballistic missiles and UAVs indicate a stable attrition dynamic.
- b) **Maritime spillover risk.** Increased military activity near critical chokepoints has elevated shipping and insurance costs.
- c) **Allied operational integration.** Air refueling, ISR support, and coordinated targeting patterns suggest growing joint operational coordination.

These developments collectively indicate that the confrontation has progressed beyond episodic retaliation toward structured multi-domain escalation.

3. Escalation Risks

The main escalation risks emerge from three structural dynamics.

- **Threshold-crossing events.** Escalation often occurs not through gradual intensity increases but through **single high-impact events**, such as catastrophic civilian casualties, leadership targeting and large-scale infrastructure damage.
- **Operational network degradation.** Systematic attacks on **C4ISR systems** may trigger rapid escalation if they undermine command and decision-making stability.
- **Norm erosion.** Public weakening of engagement rules can accelerate escalation by expanding target sets and increasing the probability of accidental escalation.

4. Policy Implications

Three strategic implications follow from the escalation ladder analysis.

- **Escalation monitoring should prioritize threshold indicators.** Policy analysis should prioritize **threshold indicators**, including maritime disruption and strategic node targeting, rather than average strike volumes.

Policy Brief

- **Economic spillovers may emerge early.** Global economic disruption may occur **before** full-scale war emerges, particularly through maritime risk premiums and energy market volatility.
- **Joint operational integration increases escalation rigidity.** Once operations evolve into coordinated campaigns, the conflict becomes **harder to de-escalate**, as coalition coordination and military commitments create institutional inertia.

Conclusion

Operation True Promise demonstrates how modern conflicts escalate through **layered operational thresholds rather than linear intensity increases**. The escalation ladder framework provides a structured method for linking operational triggers with political meaning and economic consequences.

While the conflict currently remains below the level of large-scale war, its trajectory suggests increasing structural instability. If attacks on command infrastructure intensify or engagement norms continue to erode, the confrontation may soon approach **Level 7 escalation dynamics**, where containment becomes significantly more difficult.

Understanding these escalation thresholds is therefore essential for policymakers seeking to anticipate strategic risk and manage crisis stability in the evolving Middle East conflict environment.