



ARMS CONTROL NEGOTIATION ACADEMY

The Iran-Israel Standoff: Deterrence Breakdown and Nuclear Escalation

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May, 2025

Note: *The views presented in this memorandum are those of the authors and do not represent the views of the organizations or institutions with which they are affiliated.*

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

Policy Memo

TO: The Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of China; the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs of France; the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates; the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office of the United Kingdom; and the United States' Secretary of State

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DATE: May, 2025

SUBJECT: The Iran-Israel Standoff: Deterrence Breakdown and Nuclear Escalation

The Israel-Iran conflict is escalating under a nuclear shadow, posing immediate risks of regional confrontation and proliferation. Such circumstances threaten the disarmament and non-proliferation architecture, weakening international peace and security. Through the examination of four amplified scenarios for the evolution of the Israel-Iran conflict, this policy brief sets forth recommendations for immediate intervention measures for de-escalation while shaping a more resilient environment through long-term strategies for de-escalation and risk reduction.

Within this framework, our analysis identified ***The Narrow Bridge*** – i.e., partial de-escalation with economic stagnation for fragile balance – to be the clients' regional best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA). A key discovery is: that BATNA-driven strategies reinforce cycles of instability and economic stagnation, underscoring the imperative to expand negotiated solutions. The clients, by reframing BATNAs as a cost-intensive and suboptimal alternative, could align stakeholders and could create a window of opportunity for possible agreement (ZOPA) in the Iran-Israel Standoff Context.

To mitigate the risk of adverse scenarios, our policy paper recommends enacting a range of measures in a phased strategy package accounting for short-term and long-term objectives for the clients' best outcome.

By addressing both immediate risks and structural challenges, the clients can steer the conflict toward de-escalation, and uphold global disarmament and nonproliferation frameworks, as doing so ensures their credibility, legitimacy and responsibility in maintaining international security.

¹ This memo was written as a requirement of the 2024-2025 Arms Control Negotiation Academy program. Views expressed in the memo are the opinions of the authors and do not reflect the views of their employers.

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

Introduction

Since October 2023, the balance of deterrence between Iran and Israel has shifted significantly. Following a series of tactical and operational victories against Iran's proxy networks, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have eliminated key leaders of Hezbollah and Hamas while dismantling much of their military infrastructure. The collapse of the Baath party in the Republic of Syria further complicates Iran's position, leaving its ability to sustain its "Axis of Resistance" in its campaign against Israel uncertain.² (Eisenstadt 2024)

The risk today of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons has never been more acute. As the region faces escalating conventional conflicts, there is also an opportunity to strengthen arms control norms and frameworks that can stabilise the Middle East. International security and arms control experts have consistently yet increasingly referred to the Middle East as a region plagued by "hot wars with nuclear overtones," or a powder keg. (Sethi 2024) (Chomsky and Achcar 2007)

Dr. Manpreet Sethi's analysis of nuclear escalation pathways in Southern Asia identifies nine scenarios that could lead to nuclear weapons use, several of which are highly relevant to the volatile Middle Eastern context. Seven out of these nine pathways involve fears of conventional defeat, miscalculation, false alarms, and rally around the flag dynamics. As Israel's nuclear capabilities and Iran's evolving nuclear and strategic missile programs interact, those dynamics could entail further aggressive – potentially nuclear – sanctuarization.

For example, Iran's growing concerns over Israel's backed U.S. military capabilities could lead Tehran to reconsider its strategy of relying on conventional deterrence and reduce its nuclear threshold. This shift could influence regional security dynamics, prompting neighbouring states to reassess their security strategies, potentially increasing regional tensions and fostering an environment conducive to further proliferation, crossing the international "nuclear tipping point." (Campbell and Einhorn 2005)

Given these pathways for nuclear escalation, how can the memo recipients partner effectively to intervene with Israel and Iran to prevent escalation and mitigate the risks of conventional conflict in the Middle East?

Using the Harvard Method of Negotiation to understand key actors' interests and positions, this brief identifies intervention points which extended the zones of possible agreement (ZOPA) contributing to stabilising the current escalation patterns. These recommendations focus on both immediate measures to curb conventional military tensions and long-term efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation. (Shonk 2024) The key takeaway of this brief is that the recipients

² Although recent emergence of groups in Syrian and Iraq, e.g., the Islamic Resistance Front and the Guardians of Truth Brigades (Kataib Awliya' al Haq), are to be taken into account.

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

of this brief, through the adoption of a phased approach, could create a window of opportunity for de-escalation in the Iran-Israel standoff.

Analysis

The root cause of the Iran-Israel escalation in recent history has been the culmination of each party's zero-sum competition in state security. Following the tradition of the security dilemma, this brief adopts an interest-based analysis and offers negotiation prospects accounting on each actor's core interests, i.e., targeting point, and red lines, i.e., also called reservation points. This policy brief argues that perception and misperception lead Iran and Israel to seek their best interest by adopting escalatory measures closer to the opponents' red lines—referred to as a Nash equilibrium in classical game theory.

A. *Four Worlds Analysis*

To inform decision-making, we have developed a conditions-based model that integrates *economic stability* and *escalation dynamics* as key variables. This model identifies four potential scenarios that link defence and economic policy decisions to outcomes through a systematic analysis of *pathways* to the amplified potential scenarios.

Using a 2x2 matrix framework (Rhydderch, 2017), we analyse the association between conflict escalation and economic growth. While escalation and de-escalation drive geopolitical dynamics, economic growth and recession influence national stability and nuclear ambitions. This group realizes that future developments and policy options concerning the risk of nuclear proliferation between Israel and Iran are highly influenced by the economic escalation association. Thus the framework is built on the two axes: *escalation versus de-escalation* and *economic growth versus recession*. The resulting four scenarios capture how these high-uncertainty, high-impact variables might shape conflict trajectories (ibid). By integrating political and economic forces, this structured yet flexible approach offers insights into how external interventions and internal economic pressures could shape Israel's and Iran's nuclear strategies.

Recognising the pivotal role of economic interests as a potential lever for negotiation and de-escalation becomes imperative. To systematically explore the interplay between economic conditions and conflict trajectories, we introduce a structured analytical framework that maps future scenarios.

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

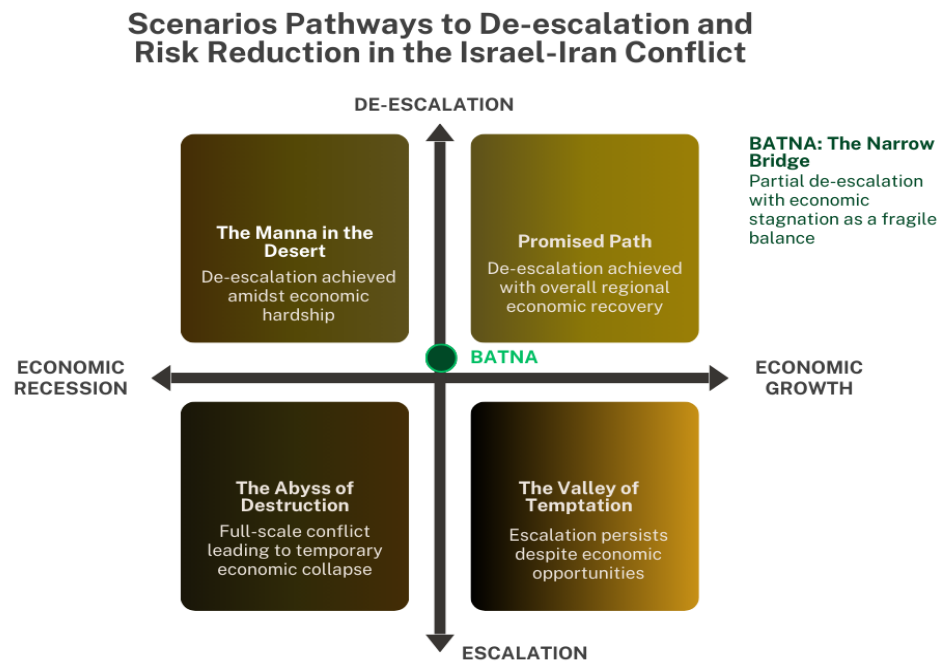


Figure 1. 2x2 Matrix De-escalation/Escalation and Economic recession/growth scenarios in the case of the Iranian-Israeli Standoff for the Middle East.

While Iran and Israel are direct belligerents in this escalating conflict, both extra-regional powers and regional states either provide support or are on the verge of involvement. Parties like the USA, China, Russia, and various European states provide other degrees of material and technical support to competitors. Actors like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), are major regional powers demonstrating neutral paths in the Iran-Israel divide. Hence while the P5 are critical in solving these regional security issues, a regional tent is needed to pull in main belligerents in the confrontation.

Each of these nations has key interests, constraints, and red lines that shape their foreign policies and relations towards one another. Briefly highlighted below is a summation of the estimated core interest and the political red line of these key actors framed in the context of the current conflict:

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

Key Actor Interests and Reservation Points								
Regional Interest-based analysis								
Actor	Iran	Israel	Saudi Arabia	UAE	USA	China	Russia	EU
Targeting Points	Regime Security	Regime Security and Regional Recognition	Economic Diversification and transformation	Regional Stability and Economic Diversification	Expanded Economic Access	Expanded Economic Access	Expanded Economic Access	Regional Stability
Reservation Points	Regime Vulnerability	Threats to existence	Threats to economic diversification	Threats to economic diversification	Oil market volatility	Oil market volatility	Oil market volatility	Increased migration

Figure 2. Key Actor Interests and Reservation Points

As shown in *Figure 2*, Iran and Israel’s interests rely on core power dynamics based on identity and existential threat perceptions; meanwhile, extended actors’ interests rely on potential power dynamics, i.e., economic access and spill-over effects in domestic politics.

B. Scenarios and BATNA

While pathways like *The Promised Path* offer hope for de-escalation and regional economic recovery, others—such as *The Abyss of Destruction* and *The Valley of Temptation*—underscore the severe risks of sustained conflict and instability. In reality, achieving a stable and prosperous "promised path" often proves challenging, particularly given entrenched geopolitical tensions and economic fragilities.

When de-escalation pathways seem unachievable, what remains is the *Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement* (BATNA). Our analysis concludes that the likely BATNA is characterised by continued patterns of escalation amid the threat of fragile and uneven regional economic growth.

For Iran, this scenario entails further reliance on proxies and external alliances with Russia and China to counterbalance sanctions and project regional influence. However, this path deepens economic stagnation and exacerbates domestic unrest, eroding Iran’s long-term resilience.

Israel’s BATNA, conversely, rests on its military superiority and strategic partnerships, enabling it to sustain covert operations and targeted strikes. Yet, such a posture risks triggering a broader regional conflict, undermining global support, and destabilising its economic and political standing.

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

For Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the absence of an agreement jeopardises their economic diversification agendas, as conflict disrupts investments and trade routes. Meanwhile, global powers face significant costs under their respective BATNAs—ranging from resource drain, reputational damage, and market disruptions.

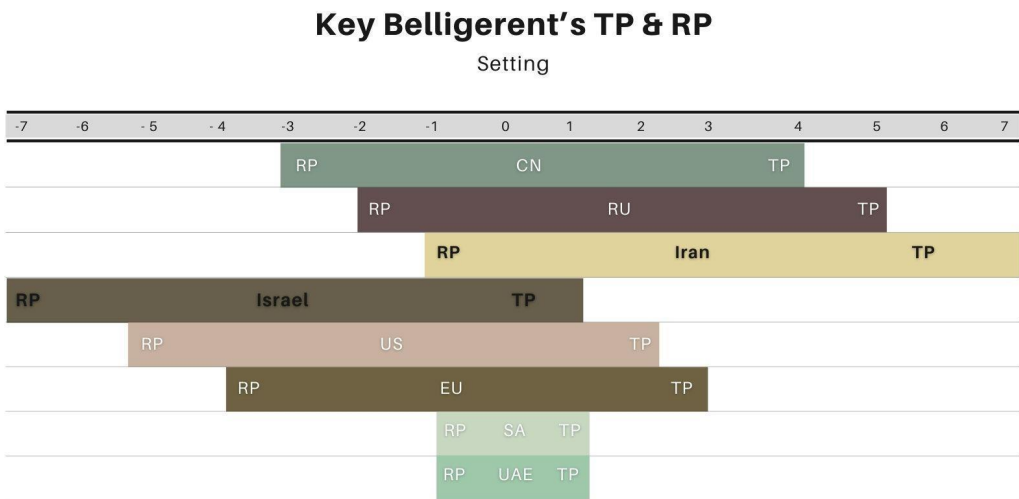
Ultimately, BATNA-driven strategies reinforce a cycle of instability and economic stagnation, underscoring the imperative of finding negotiated solutions.

The clients, by reframing BATNAs as a cost-intensive and suboptimal alternative, could align stakeholders toward constructive engagement and a shared vision for regional stability.

C. Zones of Possible Agreement: Grounds for De-escalation and Economic Growth

A ZOPA refers to the range within which parties in a negotiation can find common ground, where their interests overlap, and an agreement becomes mutually beneficial (Sebenius, 2016). Based on our BATNA analysis, potential ZOPAs between Iran and Israel emerge around the shared interest in avoiding catastrophic escalation and mitigating economic risks.

While Iran seeks to stabilise its economy and reduce external pressures, Israel prioritises security guarantees to deter threats from Iran and its proxies. Regional stakeholders like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, focused on economic growth, further expand the ZOPA by advocating for stability to attract investment. International actors, particularly through the UNSC or the renewal of the Arms Control and Regional Security in the Middle East (ACRS), can facilitate this ZOPA by offering security assurances, phased sanctions relief, and economic incentives, aligning the interests of Iran, Israel, and the broader region toward pathways for de-escalation and sustainable economic cooperation.



Countries abbreviations. CN: China; RU: Russia; US: United States of America; EU : European Union; SA: Saudi Arabia; UAE: United Arab Emirates
RP: Reservation Point
TP : Target Point

Figure 3. Original Target Point / Reservation illustration.

Shared Interest in Regional Stability

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

While neither Iran nor Israel currently prioritises full regional stability, their interests differ. Israel benefits from *limited instability* to justify its military operations and maintain regional deterrence. However, full-scale escalation threatens economic growth and international standing, making long-term stability preferable. Iran pursues instability to challenge U.S. influence and project power through proxies. Yet, economic stagnation and domestic pressures suggest that limited stability could benefit Iran by improving its economic outlook. In brief terms, Israel has short-term incentives to oppose stability but long-term incentives to seek de-escalation. Iran, despite its reliance on proxies, may ultimately gain more from stability to address economic vulnerabilities. Both nations face significant risks if regional conflict escalates further.

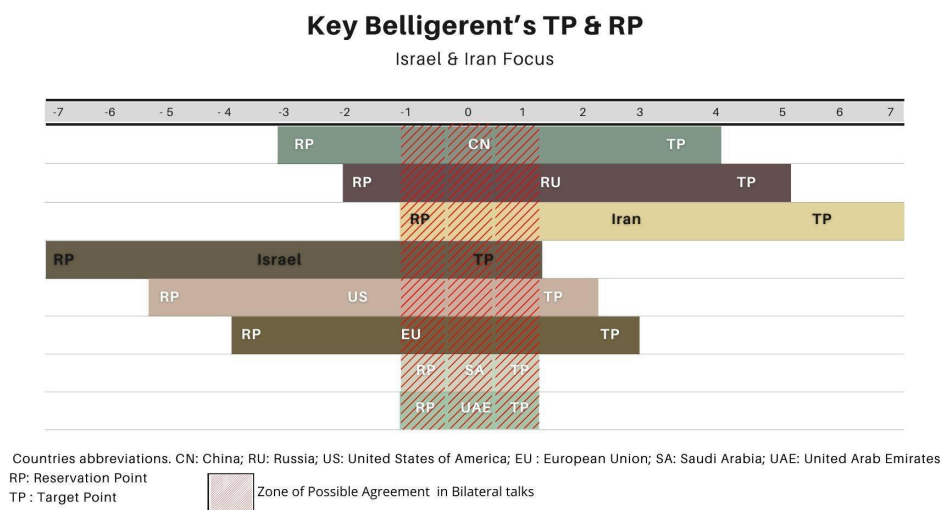


Figure 4. Key Actors' ZOPA.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE, driven by their economic diversification strategies aim for a stable regional environment conducive to attracting foreign investment and sustaining economic growth.

The USA seeks to maintain stability to protect its allies, secure energy supplies, and counterbalance the growing Russian and Chinese influence. China's priorities include ensuring stability to safeguard its energy imports, and sustain and expand critical trade routes and investments. Russia aims to expand or control damages in its influence in the Middle East while maintaining stable energy markets and countering Western dominance. The European Union, represented through France and by extension the UK, prioritises stability to avoid migration pressures and safeguard its broader security interests.

Together, these overlapping interests form a larger ZOPA where dialogue and limited agreements can occur.

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

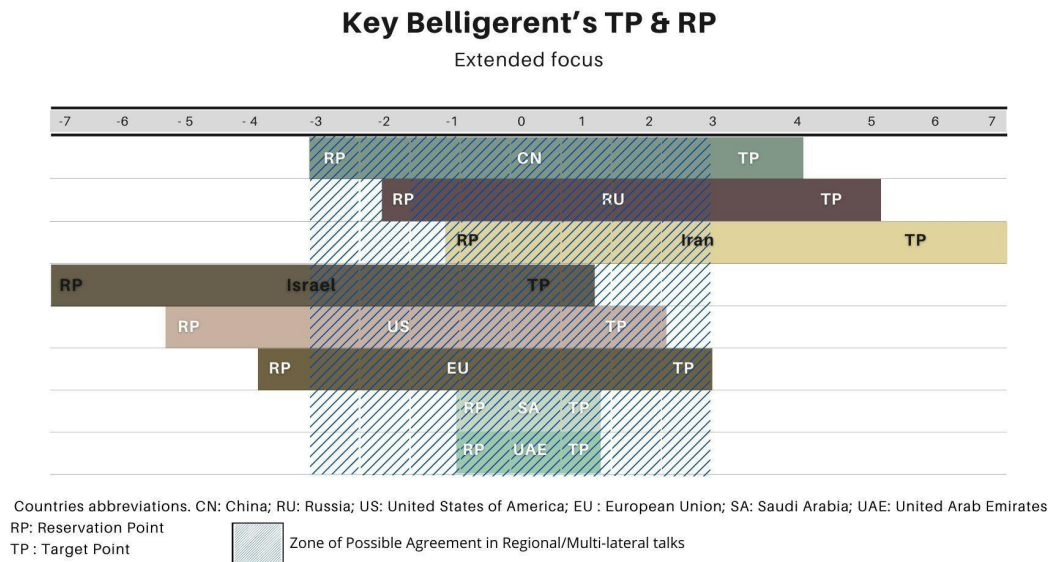


Figure 5. Extended ZOPA.

The UNSC P5, represented by China, Russia, the USA, France and the UK, has a unique ability to expand the ZOPA by leveraging its global authority and influence, through the establishment of immediate de-escalation mechanisms, guaranteeing security assurances, enforcing red lines for both Iran and Israel, hosting and mediating regional dialogues and providing economic incentives for compliance with non-proliferation norms, offering pathways to reintegrate Iran into the global economy. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the UAE could posit as a regional reinforcement, expanding opportunities for regional recognition both Israel and Iran could potentially seek.

Therefore, the UN or its regional working groups can play a pivotal role in mitigating the risks associated with BATNA-driven escalations by extending the ZOPA available. By offering multilateral guarantees, facilitating economic incentives, and enforcing compliance with international norms. The clients can reduce the attractiveness of fallback options for both Iran and Israel by emphasising the escalation-economy nexus at play in a phased negotiation process.

Observation: Escalation-Economy Nexus

Under the banner of a UN-led or regional-led diplomatic process, the active involvement of global, regional, and local powers can break the escalation cycle by creating conditions for multilateral, bilateral, and even unilateral de-escalation through a phased strategy:

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

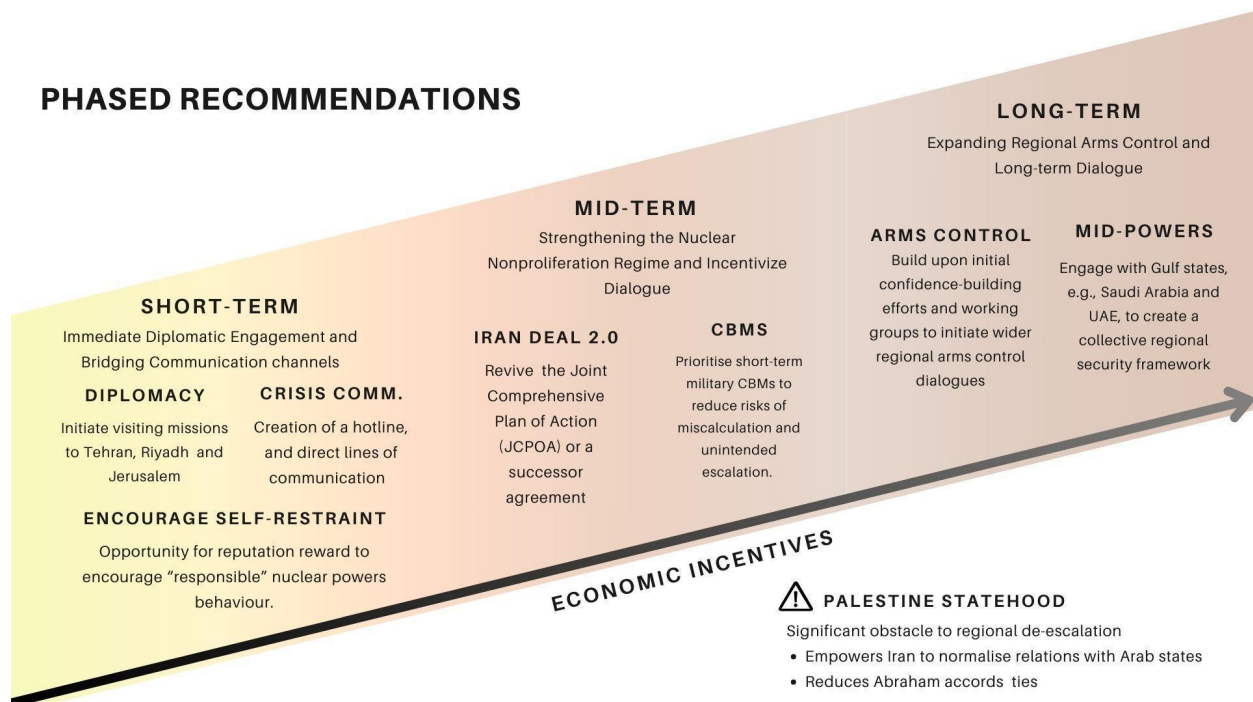


Figure 6. Phased Recommendations for Escalation Management

Phase I: Immediate Diplomatic Engagement and Bridging Communication Channels

- **Leverage Diplomatic Channels for De-escalation:** Initiate coordinated visiting missions to Tehran, Riyadh (GCC), and Jerusalem to engage in dialogue and opportunities to enhance communication mechanisms. The 2017 United Nations Disarmament Commission report highlights the importance of direct communication, reciprocal appointment of points of contact, periodic exchange of information, and notification of troop movements and military constraints as key CBMs. (United Nations 2017)
- **Crisis Communication:** Create a hotline, and encourage direct communication lines between combatants to allow signalling communication across actors.
- **Encourage Self-Restraint:** UN-led engagements, bolstered by diplomacy from the United States, Russia, China, and the European Union, should encourage active combatants to take unilateral measures to signal restraint which could be rewarded by sanction reliefs.

Phase II: Strengthening the Nuclear Nonproliferation Regime and Incentivise Dialogue

- **Iran Nuclear Deal 2.0:** Renew efforts to revive and strengthen the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or a successor agreement, addressing both conventional and nuclear capabilities, while ensuring transparency and international monitoring mechanisms to build trust between adversarial parties.
- **Build Confidence:** Prioritise short-term military CBMs to reduce risks of miscalculation and unintended escalation. This can include formal and informal communication mechanisms, leveraging existing bilateral and multi- and mini-lateral frameworks such as the Astana Peace Process, Abraham Accords, and the Negev Forum when wider multilateral mechanisms fall short.

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

Phase III: Expanding Regional Arms Control and Long-term Dialogue

- **Strengthen Regional Arms Control Initiatives:** Build upon initial confidence-building efforts and existing working groups to initiate wider regional arms control dialogues involving Israel, Iran, and neighbouring Gulf states. The creation of a nuclear-weapon-free zone and commitments to transparency could form the basis of these discussions, backed by international verification.
- **Strategic Engagement with Gulf States:** Engage with Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and UAE to create a collective regional security framework. A US-China-led framework, building on the 1990s Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks, could serve as a platform for bi- and multilateral discussions to further regional arms control. (Alberque, Notte 2024)

The tool allowing the implementation of these phases is economic diplomacy incentivizing long-term cooperation. This phased approach seeks to address immediate de-escalation through CBMs while laying the groundwork for long-term regional arms control and diplomatic efforts.

Conclusion

Given the interests, resources, and constraints identified, this brief recommends the above-described phased and coordinated strategy to mitigate the risk of nuclear escalation and conventional conflict between Iran and Israel. By applying the Harvard negotiations approach to the stakeholders' interests, we identified a very narrow ZOPA. However, our proposed strategy enables the recipients of this memo to expand this ZOPA increasing the likelihood of reaching the most desirable outcome: de-escalation multiplies economic growth.

Acknowledging that interpersonal relationships are often instrumental for the negotiations development, trust built through personal ties—whether professional, cultural, or informal—can create backchannels for dialogue when formal diplomacy stalls. In high-stakes situations, these connections may be the bridge needed to de-escalate tensions and foster compromise. Therefore, as a first step, the recipients of this memo are advised to convene a ministerial conference to discuss this policy brief further and work on coordinated efforts in the shape of diplomatic visiting missions to the relevant capitals. Those initiatives can bolster channels for dialogue and promote reciprocal appointments of points of contact, crisis lines, and notification systems. There are opportunities to encourage self-restraint on the part of belligerents and promote responsible behaviour.

Early progress in this phase can be tracked by increased regional and multilateral interactions, along with the establishment of a crisis line within the UNSC framework or a regional legitimate instrument and a committee monitoring the progress.

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

All of those phases rely on economic stabilisation efforts through trade agreements, increased foreign investment and economic relief, incentives and/or sanctions initiatives that promote security and collaboration rather than competition.

The Russia-Ukraine War is a serious cleavage that hinders the attainment of arms control goals in the Middle East. Should the Trump administration secure a negotiated end to the war, diplomats in the US, China, and the Middle East should take advantage of this peace spillover effect to push for the agenda in the Middle East. These concrete steps would require opportunities to be drafted from changes of administrations across parties. Palestinian territories will remain a justification against de-escalation in the meantime, the lack of its mention in agreements could hinder Iran's and the Arab world's ability to engage with Israel bilaterally.

By implementing this strategy the recipients of this memo can create a roadmap for immediate de-escalation, strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation regime and fostering long-term regional arms control and perhaps put the first stepping stone towards the 1995 NPT Review Conference decision's completion to create a WMD Free Zone in the Middle East.

MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

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MEMORANDUM: THE IRAN-ISRAEL STANDOFF: DETERRENCE BREAKDOWN AND NUCLEAR ESCALATION

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