

# WALKING ON A NUCLEAR TIGHTROPE

Gary Abbott examines where the next crisis for the Middle East lies



**A**s the dust appears to settle in the Middle East after over a year of conflict, another conflict looms on the horizon. US intelligence suggests Iran is drawing up plans for the faster development of nuclear weapons, prompting Israel to reportedly consider striking Iranian nuclear facilities this year. Neither Washington nor Tel Aviv will tolerate Iranian nuclear proliferation – seen by both as an existential threat – which also threatens to trigger a regional arms race, particularly with Saudi Arabia. Over the coming months, skilful diplomacy will be essential to de-escalate tensions and prevent open conflict. The region faces two primary paths: either a diplomatic agreement reminiscent of the JCPOA (a deal signed in 2015 that limited the Iranian nuclear programme in return for sanctions relief) is revived, or tensions escalate into direct clashes between Iran and Israel, with possible US assistance. Strikingly,

security conditions in Tehran and political realities in Israel suggest the latter may be more likely than many anticipate.

Israel and Iran have engaged in grey zone acts for decades, primarily consisting of targeted killings and proxy warfare. These have expanded considerably in the aftermath of 07 October, culminating in a spate of unprecedented direct clashes in 2024. At first glance, both sides appeared to have stepped back from the brink, and former President Biden appeared to have successfully contained conflict and averted a war between Israel and Iran. Despite this hopeful optimism, the underlying drivers of Iranian nuclear proliferation and the political dynamics in Israel and the US suggest confrontation is far from over.

Foreign policy theorists have stressed the interplay between domestic and international pressures. In a word, decision-making occurs at two interlinked levels: the internal political landscape and the broader international strategic environment. To have any hope

**A preemptive Israeli strike on Iran could have potentially catastrophic consequences**

of anticipating the trajectory of the ongoing Iranian nuclear crisis, understanding the realities on the ground is essential.

## IRAN

Domestically, Iran perceives itself as increasingly vulnerable. Its security institutions, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have failed to establish effective deterrence. Israeli strikes on Iranian territory have largely gone unanswered – at least in terms of substantive impact – undermining Tehran's credibility. The weakening of Iran's proxies – Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza – has considerably degraded Tehran's ability to project power against Israel. The leadership of Hamas and Hezbollah have been decimated, and it will likely take years for them to rebuild to a semblance of their former strength (if at all).

Compounding these setbacks, the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria has severed the land bridge to Lebanon, disrupting weapons transfers and funding channels vital

for its regional influence. The sudden fall of Assad also serves as a stark warning to Tehran's leadership: regimes lacking popular support can be toppled rapidly.

This security reality will likely drive Iranian political elites to desperate measures. Despite military and economic threats, pursuing nuclear weapons is a rational move. The head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) recently warned that time to sort the matter peacefully is running out. Despite threats from the US about its red lines regarding Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, and the threat of even further sanctions from the West, Tehran has so far failed to commit to a peaceful resolution. Despite the clear risks, achieving nuclear weapons would likely be the only measure that can guarantee state security for Tehran and provide the ultimate deterrent against existential threats.

**ISRAEL'S RECENT MILITARY SUCCESSES CREATE THE ILLUSION THAT SECURITY IS ALMOST ASSURED**

## ISRAEL

A similar logic applies to Israel, albeit with key differences. It can be easy to assume that Israel, having defanged Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon, will do its utmost to avoid provoking a wider war with Iran. However, this overlooks critical factors that increase the likelihood of escalation.

First, the IDF will likely be emboldened by its successes against Hamas and Hezbollah. Iran, meanwhile, is isolated and uniquely vulnerable. Besides the catastrophes incurred on 07 October, Israel has largely absorbed attacks from Iran's proxies without sustaining major damage, increasing its risk appetite.

Second, an emerging maximalist faction within Israel's security establishment could push for a more aggressive posture. Such stances have been shown recently, notably the direct attacks on Iranian territory and the occupation of Syrian territory in the Golan Heights. Recent rhetoric from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu underscores these trends: "We are facing the possibility of historic opportunities to ensure the future of Israel, the future of the Jewish people, the future of the Land of Israel, the future of the world of the Torah".

When leaders frame their strategic decisions in historical – or even Biblical – terms, the risk of adventurism and hubris increases. Israeli military and political elites understand the costs of preemptively bombing Iran's nuclear sites, but their growing confidence in Israel's air defences and offensive capabilities may lead them to believe that Iran's nuclear infrastructure can be dismantled with limited consequences. A focus on historical opportunities ultimately risks succumbing to the same overconfidence that plagued Adolf Hitler before his catastrophic invasion of the Soviet Union, where he infamously declared: "You only have to kick in the door and the whole rotten structure will come crashing down".

Additionally, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's domestic political imperatives cannot be ignored. Having overseen Israel's worst security failure in decades – the 7 October massacre – he faces immense pressure. Prolonging conflict also serves his political

survival by deflecting attention from corruption charges and bolstering nationalist support within his fragile coalition, which includes factions advocating for maximalist territorial claims and security guarantees. Striking Iran and removing its nuclear threat would likely be an attempt to cement his record while resisting ongoing corruption investigations.

## THE WEAKENING OF HEZBOLLAH AND HAMAS HAS DEGRADED TEHRAN'S POWER AGAINST ISRAEL

The Trump presidency offers an additional layer of escalation. President Trump has – so far at least – been consistent as to his red lines regarding Iranian nuclear proliferation and has expressed interest in supporting Israeli preemptive strikes, despite his hopes to avert war if possible. For Trump, Iranian nuclear proliferation would be a stain on his presidency and unacceptable to American security more broadly. This makes his support for strikes on Iran – despite his emphasis on avoiding conflicts – much more likely.

While predicting the exact nature of a conflict is almost always a futile endeavour, it is possible to yield useful insights. First and foremost, any Israeli attack will likely have some early warning. Chiefly, this concerns air space closures and diversions over Syria and Iraq, suggesting an attack is imminent. Similar to this, but less reliable, is an increase in joint statements issued by the Trump and Netanyahu administrations regarding Tehran's nuclear weapons efforts and warnings of the consequences unless they halt. On the flip side, Iranian pledges to reduce nuclear activity and announcements regarding an agreement similar to the JCPOA would be one of the few clear signals that war has been averted, and diplomacy has trumped yet more conflict.

What comes after preemptive strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities is less clear, but there are some more likely eventualities. Overall, the intensity of clashes would likely be reduced by the 1,000km of land separating the two countries, making ground operations exceptionally unlikely. Instead, engagements would likely be limited to aerial and cyber warfare. Specifically, high-risk targets for Iranian missile strikes include military bases and energy infrastructure (including fuel silos and power plants), which would be seen as a proportionate response to Israeli strikes. Adding to concerns over collateral impact, missile interceptions can cause strikes to land far from intended targets.

Depending on US involvement, Tehran may also broaden the conflict by targeting US military bases in the region. Gulf states hosting US forces are at particularly high risk of retaliatory strikes.

While Israel's Arrow missile defence system and US naval assets have offered formidable interception capabilities, recent Iranian missile attacks have instilled a false sense of security. The effectiveness of these systems against a sustained Iranian barrage remains uncertain, and the financial cost of maintaining such defences is unsustainable in the long term.

At first glance, recent military successes create the illusion that security for Israel is almost assured. However, a crisis looms on the horizon that threatens to pale in comparison with the year-and-a-half of militant conflict. Iran's security reality is precarious, which increases the likelihood it will pursue nuclear weapons as a survival strategy. For Washington and Tel Aviv, this is an unacceptable outcome. Yet, in their attempts to prevent it, they risk accelerating the very scenario they seek to avoid. A preemptive strike on Iranian nuclear facilities would likely push Tehran toward nuclear proliferation, with unpredictable and potentially catastrophic consequences. Whether both sides can step back from the brink is far from certain. The coming months will determine whether diplomacy prevails or whether the Middle East is once again plunged into war ●

**Gary Abbott** is an experienced political risk analyst at Northcott Global Solutions, specialising in Asia's complex political landscape. Focused on the topics of violent extremism and political mobilisation, Gary's insights provide valuable perspectives on regional dynamics and global affairs for clients navigating complex operational environments.

**The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria has disrupted weapons transfers and funding channels vital for its regional influence**

