



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Studies | 9 April 2026

Risk Politics and the US-Israeli War on Iran: Emotion Governance, Security Mosaic and Risk Management

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The Iranian Studies Unit

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Series: [Studies](#)

9 April 2026

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Introduction

The 2026 US-Israeli war on Iran has turned the Middle East into a paradigmatic field of risk politics, in which security is no longer treated primarily as a contest over clearly identifiable threats, but as an attempt to act under deep uncertainty, ambiguous causality and cascading systemic vulnerabilities. In this setting, security becomes intensely politicized and moralized, and strategic decision-making is increasingly filtered through collective emotions, especially anxiety, fear, and anger, rather than through stable cost-benefit calculations alone.¹

Empirically, the war's trajectory since late February 2026 demonstrates how risk management has failed and how the region's security environment, "Operation Epic Fury (US)/Operation Roaring Lion (Israel)", that killed Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, triggering multi-front retaliation, leadership decapitation cycles and the weaponization of global energy and maritime chokepoints.² The effective shutdown of the Strait of Hormuz, widely recognized as the world's most important oil chokepoint, converted a regional war into a global economic risk event, forcing even war leaders to adopt crisis-management measures that contradict their own escalation narratives (e.g., temporary sanctions waivers on Iranian oil already at sea).³

This paper develops a risk-politics analysis consistent with: (a) treating Middle East security as a risk politics arena driven by uncertainty and emotion, (b) shifting comparative analysis from polity-centred categories toward governance and ontological security, and (c) tracing how macro-level security logics interact with micro-level tools such as decapitation strikes, hybrid warfare, information war, and energy/nuclear risk spillovers.

Risk politics, Ontological Security and the Emotional Turn

Risk politics scholarship starts from a deceptively simple claim: risk is political all the way down. In Xun Pang's formulation, a long-standing science-technology paradigm in international relations treated risk as measurable probability and expected loss. But in environments of deep uncertainty, such an approach is analytically insufficient because it cannot capture the "subtle, emotion-saturated" politics that emerge when the future is both consequential and unknowable.⁴ This resonates with classic risk-society thinking: Ulrich Beck argues that modernity increasingly produces "manufactured" risks and a politics centred on anticipating and governing consequences that cannot be fully anticipated.⁵

1 Mary Douglas, *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1992), 29.

2 Chatham House, "US And Israel Attack Iran, Killing Khamenei. Tehran Launches Counterstrikes: Early Analysis from Chatham House Experts," last updated 2 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9BaiS>.

3 U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Today in Energy," 11 October 2024, <https://acr.ps/1L9Bak1>.

4 Pang Xun, "Reflections and Reconstruction: The Theory and Method of Risk Politics in Global Security and Global Governance," *International Politics Studies*, no. 2 (2024): 12–41.

5 Ulrich Beck, "Living in the World Risk Society," *Economy and Society* 35, no. 3 (2006): 329–45.

A risk-politics approach is especially useful for the Middle East today because it highlights the risk lifecycle as a sequence of political struggles rather than neutral technical steps. Risk attribution is particularly destabilizing because it fuses causality with responsibility and compensation which leads to the escalation of tensions. In the war context, attribution politics turns every strike and every failure to prevent a strike into a contest over who "caused" insecurity and thus who deserves retaliation, punishment, or regime change.

This risk-politics optic supplements securitization theory. The Copenhagen School argues that security is a distinctive kind of politics that legitimizes extraordinary measures, and that securitization is the process through which actors frame an issue as existential and thereby move it beyond ordinary politics.⁶ Risk politics helps explain why securitization becomes more volatile under deep uncertainty: when the future cannot be confidently modelled, securitizing moves are likely to be reinforced by anxiety and moral anger, not only by objective threats.

Unlike the polity-centred approach in traditional comparative politics, governance-centred comparative move prioritizing ontological security and governance survival over regime-type labels fits the region's actor ecology more in this context. Ontological security theory argues that actors seek not only physical survival but also the security of self-identity and routinized relationships; paradoxically, conflict can become "comfortable" because it stabilizes identity narratives even when it endangers physical security.⁷ For Middle Eastern politics, this aligns with leadership survival approaches such as Steven R. David's, emphasizing that leaders weigh both external threats and internal challenges to regime survival.⁸ In other words, what matters is not only whether a polity is a monarchy or an Islamic Republic, but how its governance apparatus converts insecurity into legitimacy, mobilization and control.

Finally, the emotional turn is not optional for explaining escalation. Pang explicitly links risk politics to anxiety and anger, arguing that risk management becomes entangled with affect: anxiety tends to correlate with caution, information hunger, and preventive conservatism, while anger correlates with action-orientation, certainty, and risk-taking.⁹ This has strong foundations in political psychology. Lerner and Keltner's work on "fear, anger, and risk" shows that discrete emotions can systematically alter risk perception and preferences.¹⁰ For international politics, Neta Crawford's classic argument is that emotions shape diplomacy, negotiation, and post-conflict processes, precisely the arenas now breaking down in the US-Iran crisis.¹¹

6 Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 21–25.

7 Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–70.

8 Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics* 43, no. 2 (1991): 233–56.

9 Xun, "Reflections and Reconstruction," 12–41.

10 Jennifer S. Lerner and Dacher Keltner, "Fear, Anger, and Risk," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 1 (2001): 146–59.

11 Neta C. Crawford, "The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationships," *International Security* 24, no. 4 (2000): 116–156.

From Negotiation to Conflagration: Why Risk Management Collapsed in Early 2026

A risk-politics reading begins by treating diplomacy not as an "exit" from security competition, but as a form of risk management whose feasibility depends on emotion, blame, and legitimacy. In early February 2026, the US and Iran reportedly held indirect talks in Oman, framed as an attempt to manage tensions and the nuclear file.¹² Yet the war's outbreak suggests that these talks were structurally fragile because the regional atmosphere was already saturated with fear of escalation and anger over past violence. A major part of risk politics is that "risk definition" and "risk selection" are political acts: elites decide which futures are intolerable and which dangers justify extraordinary measures.¹³

On 28 February 2026, the US and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury, striking targets across Iran and killing Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.¹⁴ US Central Command described the operation as targeting Iran's "security apparatus" and prioritizing locations posing an "imminent threat".¹⁵ A US Defence Department fact sheet dated 18 March 2026 claimed 7,800+ targets struck, 8,000+ combat flights, and 120+ Iranian vessels damaged or destroyed, indicating a sustained campaign rather than a narrow punitive strike.¹⁶ By mid-March, US officials were emphasizing operational progress and large strike numbers, again reinforcing that the war was being narrated as a decisive campaign rather than a limited deterrence restoration.¹⁷

Iran's response used the classic repertoire of asymmetric risk spillover, the most consequential of which was the effective closure of the Strait of Hormuz. It has been described by the US Energy Information Administration as the world's most important oil chokepoint; historically, flows through Hormuz average roughly 20% of global petroleum liquids consumption, and significant LNG volumes also transit the strait.¹⁸ As the conflict intensified, the International Energy Agency reiterated the strait's criticality, noting that roughly 20 million barrels per day of oil and oil products were shipped through Hormuz on average in 2025.¹⁹ The war therefore became a global inflation and supply-chain risk event, not merely a regional military contest.

Risk politics also clarifies why negotiation became hard to sustain: escalation generates risk attribution contests and moral accounting that punish compromise. Risk attribution revolves

¹² Euronews, "Iran and US to Hold More Nuclear Talks After Indirect Negotiations in Oman," 6 February 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9JI>.

¹³ Xun, "Reflections and Reconstruction," 12–41.

¹⁴ Chatham House, "US and Israel Attack Iran: Early Analysis from Chatham House Experts."

¹⁵ U.S. Central Command, "U.S. Forces Launch Operation Epic Fury," 28 February 2026, accessed: 22 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Er>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Epic Fury Fact Sheet," 16 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9k3>.

¹⁷ The Wall Street Journal, "U.S. Mideast Commander: 'Our Progress Is Obvious,'" *WSJ Live Coverage: Iran–U.S.–Israel War Updates*, 21 March 2026, accessed: 22 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9CG>.

¹⁸ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Today in Energy."

¹⁹ International Energy Agency, "Strait of Hormuz," last updated February 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba7O>.

around responsibility and compensation, and that blame becomes a central political mechanism. This is visible in the leadership decapitation cycle: Israeli strikes reportedly killed key Iranian officials beyond Khamenei, including security chief Ali Larijani and senior militia commanders, which further reduced the space for talks by converting diplomacy into a domestic legitimacy liability.²⁰

It is also worth noticing that US and Israeli goals are not identical. Israel's campaign has repeatedly targeted symbolic and infrastructural sites linked to deterrence, including Iran's South Pars gas field, a move that triggered retaliatory strikes against Gulf energy infrastructure and increased global economic risk.²¹ In risk-politics terms, divergence emerges because each actor's domestic and identity-driven imperatives define different "intolerable futures": Israel's post-7 October identity trauma prioritizes restored deterrence and punishments; the US emphasizes offshore containment and maritime reopening; Gulf states prioritize avoiding being turned into the battlefield.²²

Security Mosaicization: Axis of Resistance in Disarray, Governance Contestation, and New Domestic Fronts

The war's regional dynamics are best captured by a "security mosaic": a fragmented security environment in which sovereignty, armed authority, and governance are distributed across states, quasi-states, and non-state actors. This is not just descriptive; it changes causal mechanics. Analyses of Middle East disorder increasingly stress that non-state armed actors can become primary drivers of security outcomes, forcing major powers to confront accountability gaps and deterrence limits.²³

This "mosaicization" is visible in the evolution of the Axis of Resistance. Prior to this war, the axis was described as "shape-shifting," influenced by the erosion of state anchors and by reconfiguration after setbacks.²⁴ The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the ensuing struggle to unify armed forces in a fractured Syrian state, illustrates why polity-centred analysis is insufficient. The key analytic issue is how competing armed organizations attempt to restore governance capacity under extreme fragmentation.²⁵ In other words, governance and coercive capacity (who actually governs territory, resources, and violence) matters more than constitutional labels.

In the current war, the mosaic expands outward: Hezbollah's participation and Israel's intensified strikes in Lebanon have produced mass casualties and displacement, while Iran's retaliation has

²⁰ Susannah George, "Why Iran Does Not Appear Ready to Give In, Despite Heavy Losses," *The Washington Post*, 22 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9lh>.

²¹ Alexandra Sharp, "Tehran Vows to Strike Gulf Oil, Gas Facilities," *Foreign Policy*, 18 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba25>.

²² Amir Lupovici, "Israeli Deterrence and the October 7 Attack," *Institute for National Security Studies*, July 2024, <https://acr.ps/1L9BakD>.

²³ The Soufan Center, "IntelBrief: Non-State Actors in the Middle East Demonstrate Increasing Power and Influence," 9 April 2024, <https://acr.ps/1L9Baib>.

²⁴ Renad Mansour, Hayder Al-Shakeri, and Haid Haid, "The Shape-Shifting 'Axis of Resistance,'" *Chatham House*, last updated 12 May 2025, <https://acr.ps/1L9BafC>.

²⁵ Haid Haid, "Syria's Unruly Guns: Building a Unified Army in a Fractured State," *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*, 25 June 2025, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9MZ>.

spread into Gulf air defence battles and maritime insecurity.²⁶ Even where the US attempts "remote" warfare, the region's ecology of bases, partners, and shipping lanes makes insulation impossible: the war's costs and risks are distributed across allies and civilian systems, not confined to the primary belligerents.²⁷

Crucially, mosaicism is not only regional but also domestic. Inside Iran, the war intersects with a period of major protests and repression. Renewed conflict in February 2026 flared amid visible regime frustration and crisis dynamics following protests, situating the war within a broader legitimacy contest rather than treating it as purely external.²⁸ Harsh domestic repression has also heightened under war, including executions of protesters and intensified coercion justified through national security narratives.²⁹

At the same time, opposition politics has re-emerged in multiple forms. Renewed attention to Reza Pahlavi as a symbol of the opposition highlights diaspora fragmentation, ranging from royalists to secular republicans and other currents, underscoring that "post-regime" futures are deeply uncertain and politically contested.³⁰ Kurdish opposition politics has also intensified: analyses describe Kurdish parties forming coalitions and confronting a risky dilemma amid unclear US endgames, with discussion of potential external support and the dangers of escalation in Kurdish areas.³¹

This domestic mosaic links directly to Iran's consideration of ontological security. The Islamic Republic's war posture is not only a military strategy; it is a governance strategy aimed at maintaining regime cohesion under internal dissent and external decapitation pressure. Omnibalancing logic predicts precisely this: leaders weigh internal threats to rule alongside external threats to the state.³² In the Iranian case, the simultaneous presence of youth demands for "normal life" and state narratives of existential struggle produces a governance contradiction: the regime seeks mobilization through sacred narratives, while a large portion of society seeks de-escalation and everyday normalcy.³³

Emotions as Strategic Assets: Anxiety-Driven Precaution Versus Anger-Driven Mobilization

Risk politics becomes especially powerful when we treat emotions as strategic assets rather than merely as rhetoric. They form a force shaping risk perception, legitimacy, and escalation thresholds.

²⁶ Alon Bernstein, Sam Metz, and Samy Magdy, "Iran War Updates: Strikes and Escalation Raise Regional Tensions," *AP News*, last updated 23 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9ME>.

²⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, "2026 Iranian Protests," 2 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Ss>.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Sammy Westfall and Greg Miller, "Trump Threatens to 'Obliterate' Iran's Power Plants if Strait of Hormuz Does Not Open," *The Washington Post*, last updated 22 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba1O>.

³⁰ Azadeh Moaveni, "The Distant Promise of Iran's Would-Be King," *The New Yorker*, 22 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9MF>.

³¹ Winthrop M. Rodgers, "Kurdish Groups in Iran Face Risky Dilemma amid Unclear U.S. Endgame," *Chatham House*, 9 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9BacV>.

³² David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," 233–56.

³³ Shima Shahrabi, "Iran's Generation Z in the Protests: 'We Want a Normal Life,'" *IranWire*, 6 January 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9Baht>.

From the perspective of political psychology, fear, anxiety and anger can push decision-makers and publics toward different risk postures.³⁴

Within this war arena, two emotional logics stand out. Anxiety-driven conservative prevention best describes the US and Gulf states' posture. The core anxiety is the fear of uncontrollable spillover: a regional war becoming a global energy depression, a shipping crisis, or a base-and-civilian infrastructure catastrophe. Evidence suggests US planners underestimated Iran's willingness to choke Hormuz, an archetypal risk-politics failure where the "worst-case" was discounted until it became reality.³⁵ The US then faced the classic risk-politics dilemma: limited intervention is intended to manage risk, yet limited intervention may still produce high-intensity escalation because the adversary shifts the battlefield to systemic vulnerabilities including shipping, oil, proxies and cyber.³⁶

Domestic US politics amplifies anxiety and miscalculation. The war was launched without congressional authorization, triggering War Powers debates and congressional demands for an "exit plan," while the Pentagon reportedly sought \$200 billion in additional funding, both signals of political sustainability risk.³⁷ The more decision legitimacy is contested, the more leaders may prefer dramatic symbolic actions over slow de-escalation which can be framed as weakness. This is a risk-politics pathway to accidental, or at least unintended escalation.

For Gulf Arab states, anxiety is even more structural: they depend on US security protection while simultaneously fearing that US-Israeli escalation makes them retaliation targets and produces regional power vacuums.³⁸ Scholarly work on the Gulf's "security mosaic" argues that US military retrenchment is real but partial: Gulf autonomy is rising, yet latent mechanisms of dependence and influence persist.³⁹ In the current war, Gulf defence often appears reactive, interceptor-driven protection against drones and missiles, rather than strategic control over escalation pathways.⁴⁰

Anger-driven radical mobilization is most visible in Israel's and Iran's identity politics, though expressed differently. For Israel, the post-7 October trauma is widely analysed as a deterrence and intelligence shock. It raised fundamental questions about Israel's heavy reliance on deterrence, together with the obvious intelligence failings and the political pressures shaping them. In risk-politics terms, deterrence failure is not only a military failure; it is an identity failure that produces

34 Xun, "Reflections and Reconstruction," 12–41.

35 Zachary Cohen et al., "Trump Administration Underestimated Iran War's Impact on Strait of Hormuz," *CNN*, last updated 13 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba9F>.

36 Richard Partington, "The Stakes Are Enormous: How a Prolonged Iran War Could Shock the Global Economy," *The Guardian*, 22 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Oo>.

37 Lisa Mascaro, "Congress Looks for Trump's Exit Plan as the Iran War Drags On," *AP News*, last updated 21 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9P8>.

38 Al Jazeera, "Iran Confirms Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei Dead After US-Israeli Attacks," 28 February 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba7w>.

39 David B. Roberts, "The Gulf's Evolving Security Mosaic: Balancing the Manifest Retrenchment and Latent Influence of the United States," *International Affairs* 101, no. 6 (2025): 2193–214.

40 Lupovici, "Israeli Deterrence and the October 7 Attack."

anger and urgency to restore a threatened self-image and push leaders toward broad punitive campaigns across multiple fronts.⁴¹

In extreme form, Israeli discourse and third-party analysis sometimes invoke a "Samson" logic, which refers to massive retaliation as existential insurance. The "Samson Option" is not an official declared doctrine, but a concept widely discussed in scholarship and investigative reporting about Israel's nuclear ambiguity and last-resort retaliation narratives.⁴² The point is not that Israel chooses nuclear escalation now; it is that existential anxiety and anger can normalize unbounded escalation imaginaries, raising systemic risk even when leaders claim they seek control.

For Iran, the regime's anger-driven mobilization draws on the political use of war memory. Iranian state narrative has long framed the Iran-Iraq War as "Sacred Defence" (*Defa'-e Moqaddas*), turning existential war into a founding myth that fuses nationalism, religion, and legitimacy.⁴³ In the current war, reviving "sacred defence" memory can transform domestic frustration into emotional compensation: suffering is translated into righteousness; dissent is reframed as betrayal; and retaliation becomes morally mandatory.⁴⁴ Yet this mobilization is increasingly in tension with generational demand for normal life. Iran's Gen Z captures a cohort whose protest motivations are often less ideological than rooted in everyday life constraints and aspirations for normalcy. The regime therefore confronts an ontological-security contradiction: it seeks unity through sacred struggle while many citizens experience the war as the destruction of the very normal life they demand.⁴⁵

Micro-Tools of Risk Politics: Decapitation Strikes, Hybrid Warfare, and Nuclear Risk Spillovers

If macro risk politics explains why the arena is volatile, micro-level tools explain how risk politics is enacted. Decapitation and precision targeting have become central, especially on the US-Israel side. The opening strike killed Iran's Supreme Leader, and subsequent actions reportedly killed senior Iranian security officials, reinforcing a "decapitation-and-disruption" logic aimed at collapsing command structures and restoring deterrence through symbolic dominance.⁴⁶ Risk-politics theory helps interpret this: decapitation influences risk attribution and public emotion, identifying who is to blame and who must be punished.

Iran responds to this with decentralized resilience: when leadership is targeted, governance systems tend to institutionalize redundancy, information control, and asymmetric retaliation. One visible

41 Daniel Bayman, "The 6 Lessons Israel Overlearned After Oct. 7," *Foreign Policy*, 6 October 2025, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Qp>.

42 Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 343–47.

43 Vafa Mostaghim, "From Sacred Defense to Civic Resistance: The Evolution of War in Iran's National Consciousness," *Iran 1400*, 15 June 2025, <https://acr.ps/1L9BaeQ>.

44 Ali Khamenei, "Iran's Sacred Defense Helped to Develop the Culture of Resistance," *Khamenei.ir*, 20 September 2023, <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba4y>.

45 Sharhabi, "Iran's Generation Z in the Protests."

46 Chatham House, "US and Israel Attack Iran, Killing Khamenei."

domain is information war. Iran scaling information operations, including AI-generated propaganda and coordinated social media campaigns designed to undermine adversaries and exploit US domestic divides.⁴⁷ This is risk politics in digital form: rather than winning conventional battles alone, Iran seeks to increase the adversary's political and social risk, namely their legitimacy loss, polarization and domestic backlash.

The war has also demonstrated energy and chokepoint weaponization as a form of risk overflow. Iran's effective closure of Hormuz, and the attacks on merchant shipping, illustrate how a regional actor can impose costs on the global economy by targeting systemic arteries.⁴⁸ The International Maritime Organization's Secretary-General stated that attacks on civilian shipping are never justified, highlighting the humanitarian and operational risks for crews.⁴⁹ Naval escorts cannot guarantee safe passage, implying that purely military risk mitigation may be unsustainable and incapable of fully restoring normal maritime insurance conditions.⁵⁰

The US approach can be described as remote de-risking: a reliance on air, naval, and missile-defence assets to strike Iranian launch sites and naval capabilities while trying to avoid large-scale ground entanglement. The official fact sheet lists extensive air and naval assets and emphasizes dismantling Iran's security apparatus and maritime threats.⁵¹ Yet sustainability risks are significant in terms of concerns about US interceptor stockpiles and the possibility of a "race of attrition" in air defence, where prolonged barrages stress finite inventories and industrial capacity.⁵² In risk-politics terms, this is a shift from "winning battles" to managing capacity risk: munitions depth, industrial replenishment, and alliance burden-sharing, factors that shape escalation tolerance as much as battlefield performance.⁵³

Finally, nuclear and radiological risk management has become a central systemic concern. The IAEA has repeatedly urged restraint and monitored strikes near Iranian nuclear infrastructure and regional nuclear sites. In early March 2026, the IAEA Director General emphasized monitoring for radiological consequences and readiness to support member states amid military activity, while acknowledging his involvement in seeking diplomatic solutions to the nuclear impasse.⁵⁴ There is also confirmed damage at entrance buildings at Natanz with no expected radiological consequence, demonstrating how nuclear risk can be activated even without catastrophic release.⁵⁵ The key point

47 Robert Tait, "Iran Social Media Strategy Pivots to Information War amid US-Israel Attack," *The Guardian*, 22 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9tF>.

48 Alice Hancock, "Naval Escorts Cannot Guarantee Safety for Shipping in Strait of Hormuz, Warns IMO," *Financial Times*, 17 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Zl>.

49 International Maritime Organization, "Statement on the Strait of Hormuz," 1 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9z8>.

50 Hancock, "Naval Escorts Cannot Guarantee Safety."

51 U.S. Department of Defense, "Operation Epic Fury Fact Sheet."

52 Riley Ceder, "'Race of Attrition': US Military's Finite Interceptor Stockpile Is Being Tested," *Military Times*, 6 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9s5>.

53 The Washington Post, "Another \$200 Billion for the Military?" 21 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Hd>.

54 Rafael Mariano Grossi, "IAEA Director General's Introductory Statement to the Board of Governors," *International Atomic Energy Agency*, 2 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Pp>.

55 Al Jazeera, "IAEA Confirms Some Damage to Iran's Natanz Nuclear Facility," 3 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9Rb>.

is that once strikes occur near nuclear infrastructure, the conflict becomes governed by catastrophe anticipation: even low-probability nuclear incidents reshape diplomacy, escalation thresholds and public fear.

Implications: Toward Risk Management in a Risk-Intensive Middle East

A risk-politics diagnosis implies that "ending the war" is not only a matter of bargaining over interests. It is a matter of rebuilding risk management capacity under deep uncertainty and moralized blame. In practice, three governance tasks are urgent.

First, de-escalation requires institutionalized deconfliction, not merely leader-to-leader signalling. Civilian shipping attacks are unjustifiable, and that naval escorts alone cannot guarantee safety, so dependable maritime governance will require rules, monitoring, and credible enforcement mechanisms, not only force. Risk management frameworks such as the International Risk Governance Council's approach emphasize inclusive framing, assessment, management, and communication in contexts of complexity and ambiguity.⁵⁶ This implies that Gulf states, shipping insurers, and major Asian importers are not peripheral stakeholders; they are central actors whose incentives shape whether Hormuz reopens sustainably.

Second, nuclear safety must be insulated from retaliation cycles. The IAEA's monitoring and repeated calls for restraint show that nuclear infrastructure introduces a distinct category of catastrophic risk that cannot be treated as ordinary military collateral. A workable risk-governance package would therefore include protected-site commitments, rapid IAEA access arrangements where feasible, and crisis hotlines focused specifically on nuclear incidents, because the political consequences of even minor contamination are disproportionate in a risk politics arena.

Third, domestic political sustainability is itself a strategic variable. The US Congress pressing for exit plans, War Powers disputes, and the scale of supplemental funding requests show that the war's continuation is constrained not only by battlefield dynamics but by legitimacy and resource politics at home. In Iran, domestic repression and the mobilization of "sacred defence" narratives may stabilize the regime temporarily but can also deepen long-term instability once external pressure recedes, because weakened infrastructure and unresolved grievances can make post-war governance more fragile than wartime governance.

China, as another influential geopolitical actor, proposed Global Security Initiative (GSI) in 2023, which can be read as an attempt to re-centre risk management and is analytically plausible as a discourse intervention in risk politics. The official GSI Concept Paper emphasizes a vision of common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security and advocates dialogue over confrontation.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ International Risk Governance Council, "IRGC Risk Governance Framework," accessed: 23 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9Ba0w>.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "The Global Security Initiative Concept Paper," 31 May 2024, <https://acr.ps/1L9B9PA>.

In the Middle Eastern risk arena, such language aligns with the need to manage systemic spillovers in various fields including energy, maritime security, nuclear risk, rather than treat security solely as bilateral deterrence contests. That said, risk politics also teaches a caution: discourses do not govern risks unless they build institutions by monitoring, verification, crisis communication, and credible incentives.⁵⁸

Conclusion

From a risk-politics perspective, the US-Israel war on Iran is not best explained as a linear contest of interests or capabilities. It is better understood as an increasingly mosaiced risk arena in which deep uncertainty and emotional governance push actors toward preventive overreach, retaliatory certainty, and system-artery weaponization. Risk attribution and moralized blame reduce negotiation space; ontological-security needs, especially after identity shocks like 7 October and decapitation strikes, encourage escalatory displays that may secure domestic narratives even as they magnify regional and global catastrophe risks.

If the war is the product of risk politics, then preventing "accidental" escalation is not mainly about finding the perfect deterrent threat. It is about reconstructing risk management: keeping chokepoints open through durable maritime arrangements, insulating nuclear sites from retaliation logic through verification and restraint mechanisms, and addressing domestic legitimacy constraints that otherwise reward maximalist postures. The central paradox visible across Washington, Tehran, Tel Aviv, and Gulf capitals, is that the actors most committed to "control" are simultaneously producing the very uncertainty and systemic risk they fear.

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⁵⁸ International Risk Governance Council, "IRGC Risk Governance Framework," accessed: 23 March 2026, <https://acr.ps/1L9Bad5>.

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