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### Deterrence in shadow of ambiguity

Why war against Iran is more costly than ever

#### OPINION EXCLUSIVE



By Abed Albari  
International affairs analyst

Amid the media frenzy and persistent speculation about the possibility of a large-scale military confrontation with Iran, what transpires in strategic war rooms and high-level decision-making circles is a far cry from sensationalist headlines. Viewing the scene through the lens of cold, calculating power logic reveals that the main obstacle to any direct military action in the short term is not merely the conventional military balance, but a more complex and decisive element: "the incalculable costs stemming from ambiguity."

Despite fiery political rhetoric, major states and powers are inherently cautious actors. They typically resort to military force only when they can, with high confidence, predict the adversary's responses, the escalation path of the crisis, and the conflict's end point. Iran's security conundrum takes shape precisely at this point; where Tehran's behavior pattern does not fit into classic crisis management frameworks, and this very unpredictability has become its most effective deterrent shield.

The fundamental challenge for Western military planners and some regional actors is that Iran does not follow a linear, easily modeled doctrine. Within this framework, responding to a limited attack does not necessarily culminate in a proportionate or purely defensive reaction. In current calculations, the adversary is faced with a "black box" in Tehran's decision-making process—a box containing a spectrum of options, from tactical restraint to horizontal escalation of the conflict, existing simultaneously.

This ambiguity rules out any guarantee that a limited attack will remain confined. Relying on its regional network of influence and asymmetric tools, Iran could shift the arena of tension beyond the initial battlefield and target the adversary's vital interests in more vulnerable locations.

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Iranian women ride their motorbikes in a street in Tehran, Iran on September 7, 2025.  
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