

# Escalation Risk Assessment Framework v7.0

*Daily protocol for monitoring escalation risk in the Gulf conflict*  
*Outdoor Connect | Confidential | Full updated version*

7 April 2026

**Design intent.** The framework must not only detect danger. It must also justify disruption. Version 7.0 integrates all upgrades from v6.1 and adds four structural improvements based on five weeks of live operational use during the 2026 Gulf conflict.

**Version note.** *This version deliberately excludes market-behaviour signals as autonomous triggers. It adds a narrow exception: operational exits by institutional actors with direct knowledge of nuclear risk (Section 8a). These are not market signals. They are observable institutional decisions that carry informational weight above commercial noise.*

## 1. Purpose

This framework provides a structured daily assessment of the risk that the US-Iran conflict escalates from severe conventional war into the nuclear domain, or into attacks on nuclear facilities with fallout risk. It converts strategic analysis into a personal decision tool for contingency planning in Abu Dhabi.

The framework is built for a household that faces a real trade-off. Leaving early may reduce safety risk, but it can also damage career trajectory, trust, income continuity, and future optionality. Staying too long can do the opposite. A usable framework must therefore answer two questions at once.

- How dangerous is the strategic situation?
- Is the evidence strong enough to justify the consequences of acting now?

**Core principle.** Do not ask only: is this true? Ask: what changed since yesterday? Then ask the harder question: is the change large enough, explicit enough, and credible enough to justify the cost of acting?

## 2. What is new in v7.0

- **Institutional-actor exit signals** are added as a new sub-category (8a) within Layer 3. These capture observable operational exits by institutional actors with direct nuclear-domain knowledge (e.g. Rosatom evacuations, IAEA staff reductions, embassy closures of nuclear-capable states). They function as confirmatory evidence within Layer 3, never as standalone triggers.
- **72-hour decay rule is tightened.** A signal that technically expires under the 72-hour rule but is followed by a new signal of the same class within that window is scored as widened, not renewed. This prevents artificial resets while preserving the decay discipline.
- **Proximity-to-nuclear-facility scoring** is added to the nuclear facility attack indicator. Confirmed strikes within 100 metres of reactor or fuel storage perimeters now carry an explicit amber warning status, even when no damage to the reactor itself is confirmed. Four or more such strikes create a cumulative proximity score that elevates the indicator to Pre-Trigger status.

- **Layer 2 degradation acceleration.** When all four brakes are Degraded or worse with zero OK, the framework now treats this as equivalent to two Failed brakes for the purpose of the decision matrix. This reflects the operational reality that a system with no functioning brake is closer to failure than the sum of its degraded parts suggests.
- **Deadline-specific assessment protocol.** When a named head of state sets an explicit public deadline tied to a specific escalation threat, the framework requires an additional intra-day assessment at T-minus-6-hours and a final assessment at T-minus-1-hour. The deadline itself does not change the level, but the assessment frequency increases to prevent normalisation bias.
- **Confidence scoring and three-state institutional brakes** from v6.1 are retained without change.
- **Kahn placement discipline** is retained without change. Kahn sharpens judgment; he does not bully the matrix.

### 3. Evidence discipline

Score an indicator positive only when explicit public evidence matches the wording of the test. In war, commentary outruns facts. This framework is designed to resist that.

- Explicit beats implied.
- Recent beats cumulative.
- Named beats vague.
- Pathway-specific beats atmospheric.
- When in doubt, stay negative.

A signal that remains true but adds no new information becomes background. It can shape judgment, but it should not keep auto-triggering higher action unless it is renewed, widened, or combined with further deterioration.

### 4. Confidence standard

Every major judgment in the daily assessment should carry a confidence label. Confidence does not replace the evidence test. It qualifies how robustly the evidence supports the score.

Confidence	Meaning	Use rule
High	Direct, recent, named, and mutually consistent public evidence.	Can support action thresholds when the matrix conditions are otherwise met.
Medium	Evidence is plausible and partly confirmed, but one or more elements remain indirect, incomplete, or ambiguous.	Use with caution. Medium confidence can reinforce a threshold but should rarely carry it alone.
Low	Evidence is fragmented, inferential, stale, or contested.	Treat as context, not as a basis for irreversible action.

### 5. Layer 0: Personal context and proportionality

Layer 0 is not a threat score. It is an action-cost score. Review it weekly, or whenever household circumstances change.

Exit-cost profile	Definition	Decision consequence
High	One partner holds a senior or trust-based role in the UAE. Early departure can materially damage career trajectory, income continuity, future optionality, or household finances. Re-entry would be uncertain or costly.	Raises the evidentiary threshold for voluntary departure below Level C. Never overrides Level C or D.
Moderate	Some costs are material, but the household can absorb a temporary departure without major long-term damage.	Allows earlier discretionary action when the matrix is near a threshold.
Low	Departure is operationally easy, financially absorbable, and professionally reversible.	Permits precautionary action with less cumulative evidence.

**Assessment rule for Layer 0.** For this household, the default profile is High. That has one consequence only: it raises the burden of proof for discretionary departure below Level C. It does not dilute any Level C or Level D trigger.

## 6. Layer 1: Structural preconditions

These are the slow-moving conditions that must be present before nuclear use or nuclear-adjacent escalation enters the decision domain. Score each condition as Yes or No. Add a confidence label to each score.

### 1. Conventional impasse confirmed.

Observed when US conventional operations fail to produce a strategic breakthrough. Hormuz remains closed or selectively enforced despite naval presence. Air strikes produce destruction but not capitulation. Ground entry does not change the score unless it produces clear strategic breakthrough.

### 2. Political exit closed.

Observed when withdrawal is publicly ruled out or framed as surrender. No face-saving formula is being built. Domestic political incentives in Washington favour continuation over compromise.

### 3. Deal structure destroyed.

Observed when no active negotiation channel exists. China, Pakistan, Oman, or other meaningful facilitators have paused, withdrawn, or ceased to transmit workable proposals. Iran's demands and US red lines remain structurally incompatible and no bridging formula is under active discussion.

### 4. Continuation produces no different result.

Observed when military operations repeat without changing the strategic position. Observable stalemate persists in leverage, Hormuz access, military effect, or diplomatic movement.

### 5. Iran's conventional capacity intact.

Observed when Iran continues missile or drone attacks, maintains pressure on shipping, or expands target categories. A sudden unexplained cessation without agreement is a warning, not a relief.

### 6. Material US combat fatalities.

Observed only when explicit public reporting confirms one of two recent thresholds: more than 20 US military deaths from direct combat above Iranian territory or on Iranian soil within 48 hours; or more than 50 US military deaths from attacks on US assets elsewhere in the region within 48 hours. Older cumulative totals, wounded personnel, equipment losses, isolated base strikes, or ambiguous casualty language do not count.

**Layer 1 rule.** Indicators 1 to 5 define the structural trap. Indicator 6 is a short-horizon accelerator. When indicators 1 to 5 are all positive, the structural preconditions are fulfilled. When indicator 6 is also positive, escalation pressure is intensifying sharply.

## 7. Layer 2: Institutional brakes

Institutional brakes are the mechanisms that can still interrupt the escalation path even when Layer 1 is largely in place. Each brake is scored as OK, Degraded, or Failed.

Brake	OK	Degraded	Failed
US Congress	Serious War Powers constraint, censure, or rollback effort is visible and politically credible.	Concern is visible, but no effective binding constraint is advancing.	Congressional leadership supports continuation, or no credible institutional brake remains.

Brake	OK	Degraded	Failed
Pentagon chain of command	Senior military leadership remains intact and visibly acts as a brake on expanded operations.	Signals are mixed, or the institution looks compliant but not fully captured.	Senior leaders are dismissed, sidelined, or fully aligned with escalation logic.
China and other facilitators	An active backchannel exists and meaningful external actors are transmitting proposals or applying pressure.	Contacts remain, but leverage is weak, sporadic, or visibly deteriorating.	Facilitators have shifted from mediation to passive observation. No meaningful backchannel remains visible.
Coalition partners	Key allies still press publicly for restraint, access through Hormuz, or a face-saving off-ramp.	Allies are cautious or divided, but not openly permissive.	Key allies signal acceptance of further escalation or withdraw constraints without consequence.

**Layer 2 rule.** Each brake that moves from OK to Degraded shortens the distance to a higher action level. Each brake that moves from Degraded to Failed shortens it further. Four failed brakes indicate no visible structural interruption mechanism remains. Two or more OK brakes indicate that an off-ramp is still institutionally plausible.

***New in v7.0: Degradation acceleration rule.*** When all four brakes are Degraded or worse with zero in OK status, the framework treats this as functionally equivalent to two Failed brakes for the purpose of the decision matrix. A system with no functioning brake is closer to structural failure than the arithmetic sum of degraded components suggests.

## 8. Layer 3: Threshold events and direct precursors

These signals offer the least reaction time. Score them only when they are new, widened, or clearly renewed since the previous assessment.

### 3a. Nuclear-adjacent rhetoric.

Observed when public language promises a qualitative leap in destructive effect that no conventional package has delivered, after heavy conventional escalation has already failed or after an explicit ultimatum expires without strategic change. Do not score this when rhetoric still maps to named conventional military, infrastructure, or energy targets.

### 3b. Explicit nuclear rhetoric.

Observed when a head of state or senior official directly threatens nuclear use in an operational context, or when credible public reporting reveals presidential or NSC-level discussion of nuclear strike options. Abstract deterrence language does not count.

### Fresh insider warning signals.

Observed when there is a new or expanded evacuation order for US diplomatic or military families in the Gulf, new dispersal of senior US personnel, emergency hardening inconsistent with baseline wartime posture, or visible movement of nuclear-capable assets into theatre that is new since the last assessment.

### Attack on nuclear facilities.

Observed when conventional strikes cause confirmed damage to reactor or fuel storage at Bushehr, Fordow, Natanz, or Isfahan, or create credible publicly confirmed risk of radioactive dispersal.

### Pattern break in Iran's attacks.

Observed when there is a sudden unexplained cessation of Iranian attacks on the Gulf after weeks of sustained strikes, without a corresponding ceasefire agreement.

### 8a. Institutional-actor exit signals (new in v7.0)

This sub-category captures observable operational exits by institutional actors with direct nuclear-domain knowledge. These are not market signals. They are decisions by organisations whose risk calculus is informed by non-public technical knowledge of nuclear proximity risk.

Examples: Rosatom evacuation of staff from Bushehr. IAEA reduction or withdrawal of monitoring personnel. Closure or drawdown of embassies by nuclear-capable states (Russia, France, UK) from locations within fallout radius. Suspension of operations by major institutional actors (airlines, energy companies) specifically citing nuclear or radiological risk.

**Scoring rule.** Institutional-actor exit signals function as confirmatory evidence within Layer 3. They cannot trigger Level C alone. They can reinforce fresh insider warning signals or elevate the nuclear facility attack indicator when proximity scoring is active. When two or more independent institutional actors exit simultaneously citing risk consistent with nuclear-adjacent concerns, this is scored as equivalent to a fresh insider warning signal.

### 8b. Proximity-to-nuclear-facility scoring (new in v7.0)

The nuclear facility attack indicator in v6.1 was binary: confirmed damage to reactor or fuel storage, or not. Operational experience during five weeks of conflict near Bushehr has shown that the margin between near-miss and catastrophe is narrower than a binary test captures.

Proximity zone	Definition	Status
Zone A: Direct hit	Confirmed damage to reactor core, fuel storage, or cooling systems.	Triggers Level D immediately (unchanged from v6.1).
Zone B: Perimeter strike	Confirmed strike within 100m of reactor or fuel storage perimeter. No reactor damage confirmed.	Amber warning. Elevates indicator to Pre-Trigger when combined with any other active Layer 3 signal.
Zone C: Cumulative proximity	Four or more confirmed strikes within 500m of reactor or fuel storage across the conflict.	Amber warning. Creates a cumulative proximity score that functions as background elevation for the indicator.

**Current status (7 April 2026):** Four strikes confirmed near Bushehr since 28 February. One strike at 75m from perimeter (IAEA satellite confirmation, 6 April). Rosatom has evacuated 198 staff. Zone B and Zone C criteria are both met. Indicator status: Pre-Trigger (Amber).

## Interpretation rules

Rule	Application
Freshness matters	A Layer 3 signal must be new, widened, or materially renewed since the previous assessment. Otherwise it becomes background.
72-hour decay rule (updated v7.0)	Fresh insider warning signals remain override-capable for 72 hours. After that, they remain relevant context but no longer trigger Level C by themselves unless broadened or combined with further deterioration. New in v7.0: a signal that expires under the 72-hour rule but is followed by a new signal of the same class within that window is scored as widened, not renewed.
Conventional-first rule	When rhetoric still points to conventional targets or means, do not auto-score 3a.
Ground combat rule	Sustained US ground combat in Iran does not itself equal nuclear escalation, but it increases the weight of indicator 6 and makes 3a more consequential if conventional results still fail.

## 9. Layer 4: Kahn escalation placement

Kahn is not a substitute for evidence. He is a discipline for locating the crisis on the escalation ladder. This layer must be completed every day, even when the action level does not change.

- Current rung number and description.
- Previous rung number and description.
- Next rung number and description.
- What moved the crisis from the previous rung to the current rung.
- What could move the crisis from the current rung to the next rung.

Band	Meaning	Decision effect
Rungs 1-10	Serious but still early.	No automatic change to the decision matrix.
Rungs 11-15	Crisis under nuclear shadow.	Heightens attention, but no automatic action change.
Rungs 16-18	Nuclear reference without nuclear use.	Can reinforce a move from A to B when Layer 1 is near fulfilment.
Rungs 19-20	Terminal non-nuclear crisis.	If Layer 1 indicators 1 to 5 are all positive, create a minimum floor of Level B.
Rung 21+	Entry into the domain of intentional nuclear use or clearly equivalent nuclear-domain behaviour.	Will normally coincide with Level C or D through the ordinary matrix. Kahn cannot reduce those levels.

**Kahn discipline.** Kahn should sharpen judgment, not bully the matrix. A high rung without matching evidence does not justify flight. A low rung does not excuse ignoring an explicit nuclear trigger.

## 10. Decision matrix v7.0

The assessment is cumulative. Higher levels include actions from lower levels. Confidence should be attached to the resulting level itself: High when the level is driven by explicit threshold evidence; Medium when it is driven by strong structural convergence but without a direct trigger; Low when the level is highly interpretive.

### Level A: Monitor

Condition	Action	High exit-cost rule
Layer 1: fewer than 4 of indicators 1 to 5 active; or structural preconditions not fulfilled; or at least 2 brakes still OK. Layer 3: no fresh threshold events. Kahn: below 19, or 19-20 without Layer 1 indicators 1-5 all positive.	Daily assessment. Documents and go-bag ready. Vehicle fuel above 75%. Route check complete. Continue normal life.	Do not depart. Do not disrupt employment.

### Level B: Prepare

Condition	Action	High exit-cost rule
Layer 1 indicators 1-5 all positive, but at least 2 brakes remain OK or Degraded and no Level C trigger is active. Or indicator 6 is positive. Or 3a is positive. Or pattern break is positive. Or fresh insider warning signals are active without explicit nuclear rhetoric and without broadening over the last 72 hours. Or Kahn 19-20 while Layer 1 indicators 1-5 all positive. NEW v7.0: Or all four brakes Degraded/worse with zero OK (degradation acceleration rule).	Book flexible flights within 7 days if economically sensible. Reduce possessions to what fits in two suitcases. Move critical financial access outside the UAE. Brief employer and NL contact. Keep departure capability live.	Preparation is justified; departure is not yet justified solely by this level.

**Level C: Go**

Condition	Action	High exit-cost rule
Layer 1 all 6 indicators positive and Layer 2 leaves only 0 or 1 brake in OK state, with at least 2 brakes Failed. Or 3b is positive. Or fresh insider warning signals are new or materially widened within the last 72 hours and combined with at least one of: 3a positive, sustained US ground combat in Iran, all but one brake no longer OK, or visible movement of nuclear-capable assets into theatre. NEW v7.0: Or nuclear facility indicator at Pre-Trigger (Amber) combined with 3a positive and zero brakes OK.	Depart Abu Dhabi. Fly if commercial aviation remains operational. If airspace restricts, drive to Muscat via Al Ain or other pre-verified route. Execute communication protocol immediately.	Personal cost no longer delays action.

**Level D: Shelter / Immediate exit**

Condition	Action	High exit-cost rule
Confirmed damage to reactor or fuel storage at a nuclear facility. Or confirmed nuclear detonation by any actor in theatre. Or departure routes become compromised during Level C execution.	If departure is still possible, execute immediately. If not, shelter in place: interior room, lowest practical floor, windows sealed, await official UAE guidance, activate emergency contact.	No proportionality override is permitted.

## 11. Override rules

- Confirmed damage to reactor or fuel storage at a nuclear facility triggers Level D immediately.
- Explicit nuclear rhetoric as defined in 3b triggers Level C immediately.
- Fresh insider warning signals trigger Level C only when they are new or materially broadened within the last 72 hours and are accompanied by at least one additional deterioration signal listed in the Level C rule.
- Kahn placement does not override the matrix below rung 21.
- **New in v7.0:** Nuclear facility indicator at Pre-Trigger (Amber) combined with 3a positive and zero brakes OK triggers Level C. This path did not exist in v6.1.
- **New in v7.0:** Two or more independent institutional-actor exits citing nuclear-adjacent risk are scored as equivalent to a fresh insider warning signal for the purpose of the Level C combination rule.

## 12. Deadline-specific assessment protocol (new in v7.0)

When a named head of state sets an explicit public deadline tied to a specific escalation threat, the standard daily assessment is insufficient. Deadlines compress decision time and create binary risk events that can shift the matrix within hours.

The deadline protocol does not change the level. It changes the assessment frequency.

Timing	Action	Purpose
T-24 hours	Standard daily assessment with explicit deadline-awareness note.	Baseline before the deadline window opens.
T-6 hours	Additional intra-day assessment. Review all Layer 3 signals. Check for new diplomatic developments, military movements, or rhetoric changes.	Catch fast-moving signals that could shift the matrix before the deadline expires.
T-1 hour	Final pre-deadline assessment. Confirm current level. Pre-decide: if the deadline passes without deal or extension, what is the next assessment action?	Prevent decision paralysis at the moment of maximum ambiguity.
T+1 hour	Post-deadline assessment. Score what actually happened: deal, extension, partial execution, or full execution of threat.	Convert the deadline outcome into an updated matrix level.

**Current application (7 April 2026):** Trump has set 8:00 PM ET Tuesday (04:00 GST Wednesday 8 April) as a deadline for Iran to reopen the Strait of Hormuz or face massive strikes on civilian infrastructure. T-6 assessment: 22:00 GST Tuesday. T-1 assessment: 03:00 GST Wednesday. T+1 assessment: 05:00 GST Wednesday.

## 13. Daily assessment protocol

Step	What to do	Output
1	Review Layer 0 only if household circumstances changed. Otherwise keep the existing exit-cost profile.	High / Moderate / Low
2	Score all indicators in Layers 1 to 3 using the evidence discipline. Add a confidence label to every non-obvious score.	Y/N with confidence for Layer 1 and Layer 3; OK/Degraded/Failed for Layer 2

Step	What to do	Output
3	Place the crisis on Kahn's ladder and state the movement logic.	Current, previous, next rung; trigger up; possible trigger up again
4	Mark whether each active indicator is new, widened, unchanged, or reduced versus yesterday.	Change log
5	Apply the decision matrix. Then ask a final sense-check question: what is carrying the level today: evidence, structure, or interpretation?	Resulting level and action
6 (new v7.0)	If a named deadline is active, confirm deadline protocol timing and pre-decide the post-deadline response.	Deadline assessment schedule and pre-decision

**Time discipline.** A normal daily assessment should take no more than fifteen minutes. If it takes longer, the analyst is likely drifting from evidence into commentary.

## 14. Suggested record format

Field	Entry
Date / time	
Layer 0	Exit-cost profile: High / Moderate / Low
Layer 1	1 Y/N + confidence; 2 Y/N + confidence; 3 Y/N + confidence; 4 Y/N + confidence; 5 Y/N + confidence; 6 Y/N + confidence
Layer 2	Congress OK/Degraded/Failed; Pentagon OK/Degraded/Failed; Facilitators OK/Degraded/Failed; Coalition OK/Degraded/Failed. Count of OK brakes. Degradation acceleration rule active? Y/N
Layer 3	3a Y/N + confidence; 3b Y/N + confidence; Fresh insider warning Y/N + confidence; Nuclear facility attack Y/N + confidence + proximity status; Pattern break Y/N + confidence; Institutional-actor exits Y/N + confidence (new v7.0)
Kahn	Current rung / title; previous rung / title; next rung / title
Kahn movement	What moved the crisis here; what could move it higher
Change since yesterday	New / widened / unchanged / reduced
Resulting level	A / B / C / D + confidence
Action taken	None / prepare / depart / shelter
Deadline status (new v7.0)	Active deadline? Y/N. If Y: deadline time, T-6/T-1/T+1 schedule, pre-decision
Notes	What would need to happen to change the level tomorrow?

## 15. Standing readiness checklist

Item	Minimum standard
Passports	Both passports accessible within 5 minutes.
Go-bag	Passports, cash (EUR + USD), chargers, medications, document copies, clothes for 72 hours.
Vehicle	Fuel above 75%; insurance and border readiness verified.
Route	Primary and backup route verified; offline maps downloaded; visa status checked.
Financial access	Sufficient funds accessible from outside the UAE.
Emergency contact	Named NL contact knows route, protocol, and check-in schedule.
Communication plan	Meeting point agreed if separated; maximum wait time defined; backup channel arranged.
Employer protocol	Neutral, concise message prepared in case Level B shifts to C.
Flight optionality (new v7.0)	At Level B: flexible flights booked within 7 days. Airlines and routes monitored for cancellations. Alternative routing via Muscat confirmed.

## 16. Cognitive bias warning

The greatest risk in applying this framework is not only underreaction. It is also false precision.

- **Normalisation bias** makes each new event feel like more of the same.
- **Panic bias** makes one dramatic event carry more weight than it deserves.
- **Narrative bias** turns elegant interpretation into pseudo-evidence.
- **Kahn misuse** can create the illusion that naming a high rung has already justified a personal decision.
- **Role bias** can tempt the analyst to protect career continuity for too long, especially under a high exit-cost profile.
- **Deadline bias** (new in v7.0) can cause the analyst to treat the deadline as a decision point rather than an information event. The deadline changes the assessment frequency, not the level.

Trust the framework when it captures a real change. Do not let dramatic language, your own fear, or the elegance of a model bully you upward when nothing materially changed.

## 17. Analytical foundations

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- Herman Kahn, *On Escalation* (1965).
- Thomas Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (1960) and *Arms and Influence* (1966).
- Robert Pape, escalation framework and public commentary.
- Cramer-Rao bound and the information limits of inference.
- Outdoor Connect Gulf Series essays 1 to 10 and related systemic-shock work.

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**Final instruction.** Use the framework to decide, not to dramatise. The purpose is disciplined action under uncertainty, not the appearance of certainty.