Insight Forward

Scenario: U.S. and Israeli Intervention Framed Around Protection of Iranian Protesters

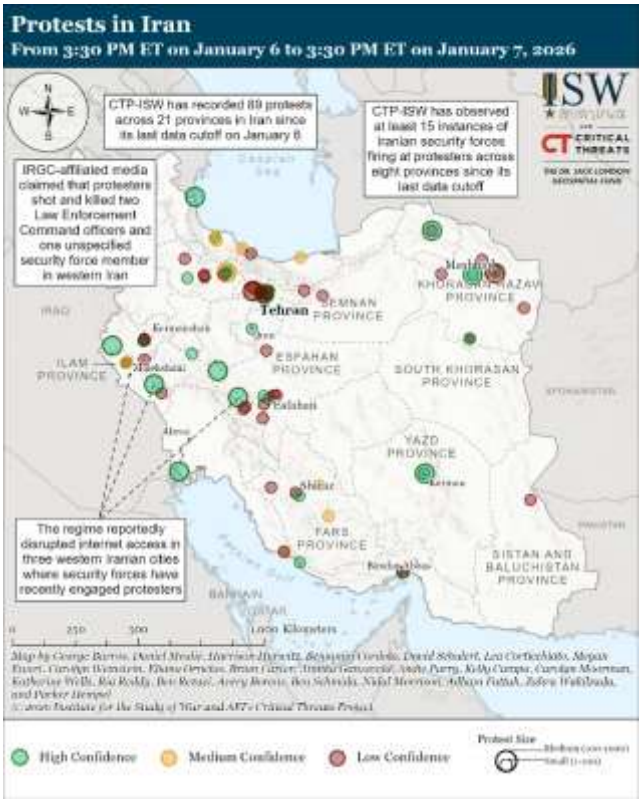
PURPOSE AND FRAMING OF THE SCENARIO

The following scenario examines a strategically relevant possibility that Israel and the United States respond to Iranian protest repression with a targeted campaign of bombings and assassinations, explicitly justified on humanitarian and security grounds. The objective is to analyze what it would likely look like in practice, how Tehran would react, and what the geopolitical and security consequences would be across the region and globally. Scenario work of this kind is not about predicting the future. It is about stress-testing assumptions and mapping the range of plausible outcomes that could affect organizations, supply chains, personnel, and investments.

Energy flows, maritime security, insurance pricing, sanctions exposure, digital infrastructure, and regional operating conditions all depend heavily on the stability of the Gulf and eastern Mediterranean security environment. A scenario in which humanitarian-framed intervention triggers expanded proxy conflict, maritime disruption, and geopolitical realignment has immediate implications for business continuity planning, logistics resilience, and executive protection. The purpose of this exercise, therefore, is to think about the second- and third-order effects that shape the environment in which global organizations must operate.

Escalation Scenario and Trigger

Iran is experiencing sustained nationwide unrest. Protests that initially emerged in Tehran's Grand Bazaar have spread to dozens of cities, driven by currency collapse, inflation, and long-standing political grievances. Security forces have responded with force, resulting in multiple fatalities and mass arrests. Incidents in Malekshahi and Abdanan have become emblematic, as funerals have turned into large demonstrations and local security control has at times been strained. Independent reporting and rights organizations estimate several dozen protester deaths nationwide and thousands of detentions. Iranian officials have adopted increasingly uncompromising rhetoric. Senior judicial figures have promised "no leniency" for "rioters," while the foreign ministry has accused the United States and Israel of incitement and interference. President Trump has publicly stated that the U.S. is "locked and loaded" if protesters are massacred, and Israel's prime minister openly backs the demonstrators while vowing never to allow Iran to restore its ballistic missile capabilities. Iran, for its part, warns it may take preemptive action if it detects threats.



Source: Institute for the Study of War

The escalation trigger in this scenario is not the protests themselves, but a discrete and clearly documented atrocity that alters external risk calculations. For example, violence against protesters in Malekshahi escalates, with IRGC and

Basij forces firing into crowds and producing dozens of deaths in a single day, corroborated by video and satellite imagery. At the same time, security forces storm a hospital treating wounded protesters in Tehran, with footage of beatings and live fire in medical facilities circulating widely. The U.S. administration and Israel then frame Iran's actions as crossing a red line: "mass, deliberate killing of civilians" and "crimes against humanity," explicitly linking intervention to protection of civilians and punishment of the perpetrators.

Likely Shape of Israeli and U.S. Operations

- **United States:** Public justification emphasizes a mix of "Responsibility to Protect" language and counterterrorism framing as the IRGC is both a terrorist-designated entity and the main organ of repression. The White House announces a "limited, time-bound operation" aimed at degrading the regime's capacity to massacre protesters and destabilize the region, not regime change.
- **Israel:** Frames its actions as both humanitarian and self-defensive. It highlights Iranian killings of civilians and Iran's continued missile and proxy threats, arguing that weakening the IRGC directly supports both Iranian civilians and Israeli security.

In both capitals, legal rationales rely on a combination of self-defense (against IRGC and proxy threats) and humanitarian intervention grounded in ongoing atrocities.

Target Set and Operational Design

In a realistic scenario, neither the U.S. nor Israel launches a full-scale war. Instead, they pursue a limited but sharp coercive air and covert campaign focused on the regime's coercive apparatus rather than broad economic or civilian infrastructure.

Primary Israeli targets:

- IRGC and Basij command-and-control nodes involved in repression, especially in western provinces (Ilam, Kermanshah, Lorestan) and Tehran.
- Intelligence and cyber units used for surveillance and repression (Ministry of Intelligence, IRGC intelligence).
- Selected missile and drone sites connected to threats on Israel.

Primary U.S. targets:

- IRGC bases and depots that provide logistics and firepower to internal security forces.
- Communications hubs linking Tehran to provincial security commands.
- A small number of high-value individuals: mid- to senior-level IRGC and Basij commanders directly responsible for massacres.

The campaign would likely resemble an expanded "maximum pressure by force" operation with 2–7 days of intensive air and missile strikes and follow-on covert actions (assassinations, cyber campaigns, economic disruption) continuing over weeks or months.

Assassinations / Targeted Killings

Targeted killings are likely to be:

- **Focused on individuals clearly associated with atrocities, to maintain political legitimacy, such as provincial IRGC commanders** in Ilam, Kermanshah, and Khorasan, senior Basij coordinators, and members of the national security council who ordered lethal crackdowns.

- **Conducted by Israel, with U.S. intelligence support.** The template is the Soleimani operation and prior Israeli campaigns against IRGC figures and nuclear scientists but expanded to include those tied to domestic repression as well as external programs.
- **Covert or semi-acknowledged.** Israel probably maintains ambiguity; the U.S. might acknowledge strikes on facilities but not every killing.

Cyber operations would complement kinetic action by disrupting internal surveillance systems, shutting down databases used to track protesters, and degrading command networks used to coordinate crackdowns.

Immediate Security Consequences

Inside Iran

- **Short-term shock and fragmentation:** Initial strikes degrade some IRGC and Basij capacity, especially in provincial cities. This could create windows of opportunity for protesters in specific localities.
- **Rally-round-the-flag vs. regime fracture:** The regime will try to use foreign attacks to rally the population. In core conservative and nationalist constituencies that will work. Among communities already in open revolt (e.g., parts of Ilam, Abdanan, Malekshahi), foreign strikes may instead harden anti-regime attitudes and embolden protest activity. Elites split between hardliners (doubling down on resistance) and pragmatic factions worried about survival.
- **Short-term protest dynamics:** In the very short term, protests intensify, fueled by the perception that the regime is vulnerable and international attention is high.
- **Medium-term protest dynamics:** Over time, if strikes taper off and the regime reconstitutes coercive capacity, the state is likely to re-impose control through even harsher repression, now framed as wartime emergency.

Net effect: a brief period of expanded protest space, followed by a re-centralization of coercive power unless the security services fissure in a way that produces defections or a coup. That outcome is possible but not the most likely.

Regional Security

Iran will not passively absorb a joint U.S.–Israeli campaign justified on “protection of protesters.” Likely responses:

- **Missile and Drone attacks targeting Israel:** Iran would likely respond by launching missile and drone attacks against Israel. The immediate impact of such strikes would probably be limited, given Israel’s layered and highly effective air defense systems, reinforced by coordinated support from the United States. However, if any attacks were to penetrate these defences and cause significant damage, the risk of escalation would increase, potentially prompting broader Israeli strikes against Iranian targets.
- **Proxy escalation:** Hezbollah threatens or conducts limited rocket and missile salvos, calibrated to avoid a full war but to show capability. Iraqi militias target U.S. bases and diplomatic facilities. Houthis ramp up attacks on Red Sea shipping and Gulf infrastructure.
- **Maritime insecurity:** IRGC Navy and proxies harass tankers, seize or sabotage vessels, and increase drone and missile threats in the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, raising insurance premiums and energy market volatility.

- **Border tension with Israel:** Northern border (Lebanon, Syria) shifts to a higher alert baseline. Israeli pre-emptive strikes accelerate to blunt proxy capabilities before they can be fully mobilized.

Short-term risk of miscalculation would be significantly higher because the main danger is that one of these proxy theaters escalates from "messaging" into a major conflict by accident or through a misaligned escalation by a local commander.

GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Geopolitically, the most likely outcome is not regime collapse but regime hardening. External attack would deepen the role of security actors inside Iran, empowering the IRGC while shrinking the influence of civilian institutions and moderate political factions. The regime would survive, but it would be more militarized, nationalist, and inwardly suspicious than before. At the same time, Iran's legitimacy crisis would intensify beneath the surface. Meanwhile, the intervention would accelerate Iran's geopolitical realignment. Russia and China would condemn Western aggression, extend diplomatic and economic support, and draw Iran further into their strategic orbit, reinforcing a more polarized global order.

For the United States and Israel, the consequences would be equally mixed. Both would demonstrate capacity and willingness to impose costs on Iran and to intervene in defense-of-rights narratives. However, they would also inherit a more fragile regional equilibrium requiring constant deterrence maintenance. The United States would find itself still more deeply enmeshed in Middle Eastern security management without gaining clear leverage for political reform inside Iran. Israel would settle into an intensified version of its ongoing shadow war with Iran, with higher tempo and higher risk.

Finally, the intervention would reshape nuclear dynamics. Tehran would draw the lesson that only stronger deterrence guarantees regime survival, increasing its incentive to advance technical capability even while avoiding overt breakout. Israel, reading this as confirmation of its deepest concerns, would intensify surveillance and sabotage activities. The probability of a nuclear crisis in the following few years would rise materially.

Net Assessment

If the U.S. and Israel use protest repression as an explicit justification for bombings and assassinations, the most likely pattern is:

- A limited, high-intensity campaign against IRGC/Basij and associated assets, with a small but symbolically powerful set of targeted killings.
- A brief tactical gain for protesters and significant damage to the regime's coercive apparatus, but not regime collapse.
- A reconstitution of internal security under a more militarized, IRGC-centric state, which then uses the intervention to legitimize harsher repression.
- A higher baseline of regional instability, with more active proxy warfare, maritime disruption, and elevated risk of miscalculation.
- A deeper geopolitical alignment between Iran, Russia, and China, and a more polarized environment for diplomacy and nonproliferation.

From a policy or corporate-risk perspective, the key takeaway is that humanitarian-framed intervention in a context like this is unlikely to be cleanly separable from broader strategic effects. Even if it degrades

the regime's repressive capacity in the near term, it also tends to harden threat perceptions, drive adversaries into alternative alignments, and normalize a more dangerous regional equilibrium.

USING SCENARIO PLANNING TO PROTECT CORPORATE SECURITY AND VALUE CHAINS

The scenario demonstrates that even a limited, purpose-bounded intervention aimed at degrading Iran's repressive apparatus would likely spill over into prolonged regional instability, intensified proxy warfare, maritime insecurity, higher geopolitical polarization, and renewed nuclear uncertainty. These developments have the potential to cascade into freight costs, shipping risk, insurance premiums, regulatory exposure, cyber-threat profiles, reputational risk, and operating continuity across multiple sectors.

For corporate security and risk leaders, the key value of this exercise lies in pre-emptive risk translation. Instead of reacting once escalation occurs, organizations can use scenarios like this to identify exposure in advance: reliance on specific shipping lanes, concentration risk in vulnerable energy or industrial corridors, dependence on suppliers subject to sanctions, or staff operating in high-risk jurisdictions. Scenario planning also clarifies the interdependencies that are easy to overlook, such as the link between Red Sea insecurity and global insurance costs, or between proxy escalation and cyber-operations targeting Western commercial infrastructure.

In practical terms, this kind of analysis supports several security and resilience priorities:

- Business continuity planning that anticipates maritime and energy disruption.
- Supply-chain diversification away from chokepoints likely to be affected by conflict.
- Enhanced executive and traveler protection in high-risk regions.
- Cybersecurity preparedness reflecting the likelihood of retaliatory digital campaigns.
- Regulatory and sanctions foresight, particularly where risk appetite intersects geopolitics.

Most importantly, scenario planning helps organizations discipline their thinking. The objective is to ensure leadership is asking the right questions before a crisis materializes. Instead of asking only, What happens if conflict escalates?, the better question is, How would escalation reshape the operating environment, our risk exposure, and the stability of the value chain? And instead of asking, How do we respond when disruption occurs?, the stronger question is, What resilience measures should already be in place before disruption arrives?

When organizations frame scenarios through these questions, they move from passive reaction to active preparation. Scenario analysis becomes a structured method for identifying blind spots, testing assumptions, and clarifying where security, logistics, legal exposure, and strategic planning must converge. In that sense, it is a practical tool for improving decision-making discipline and protecting the continuity of operations when geopolitical risk becomes operational reality.