

Article

From Escalation to War: Regime Transformation and Adaptive Political Capacity

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Highlights

How your work links to systems science via your contributions to systems practice, theory, and/or methodology.

- This work develops a systems-based theoretical framework that reconceptualizes escalation as a regime transformation driven by the progressive loss of adaptive political capacity, shifting the analytical focus from discrete violent events to changes in the structures that sustain political coordination.
- This work integrates systems concepts, including resilience, feedback, path dependence, hysteresis, and political niche construction, into a unified framework that explains how political systems progressively reorganize around coercive coordination through self-conditioning dynamics.

The main findings and/or the implications of the main findings.

- The findings show that war becomes difficult to reverse not simply because violence intensifies, but because escalation progressively transforms the institutional, informational, and relational conditions required for non-coercive political coordination.
- The findings suggest that security analysis and governance should complement event prediction with the assessment of regime transformation, focusing on trajectories of adaptive political capacity rather than on violence indicators alone to better understand escalation, irreversibility, and prevention.

Abstract

This article reconsiders escalation in international politics by shifting the analytical focus from discrete events to transformations in political order. While existing approaches have generated important insights into the dynamics of conflict, particularly through the analysis of decision-making, interaction, and violence intensity, they tend to conceptualize escalation as unfolding against a relatively stable political background. This article builds on these contributions while advancing a complementary perspective in which escalation is understood as a regime-level transformation driven by the progressive loss of adaptive political capacity, the ability of political systems to sustain non-coercive coordination under stress. Drawing on debates on temporality, resilience, and anticipation, it shows how escalation reshapes institutional mediation, informational environments, and relational structures, progressively reorganizing political order around coercion. The analysis clarifies the distinction between escalation as variation within an existing order and escalation as transformation of that order, and reflects on the implications of this perspective for the study of war and security. The framework is empirically applied to the destruction of informational coordination infrastructure during the Gaza War (2023–2025), where documented patterns of journalistic infrastructure elimination offer a contemporary case through which to examine the mechanisms by which coercive coordination becomes entrenched.



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1. Beyond Events: Escalation as a Problem of Political Order

Despite decades of research on war and escalation, security studies still struggle to explain a persistent empirical puzzle: why conflicts that appear manageable for long periods suddenly reorganize political life in ways that prove difficult to reverse [1,2]. Dominant approaches continue to treat escalation as a sequence of events, decisions, or thresholds unfolding against a largely stable political background, even as they acknowledge complexity and uncertainty [3,4]. This article starts from a different premise: escalation is not merely an intensification of violence, but a process through which the conditions of political order themselves are progressively transformed.

War and large-scale armed conflict remain among the most consequential phenomena of contemporary world politics. They reshape political authority, reorder social relations, and generate institutional and normative effects that extend well beyond periods of overt violence [1,5]. However, in much contemporary security research, escalation continues to be rendered legible primarily through discrete events: incidents, thresholds, and short-horizon signals that unfold against an implicitly stable background of political and institutional order. Whether framed as bargaining failure, crisis mismanagement, or the accumulation of violent acts, escalation is commonly approached as an intensification of activity, obscuring the transformation in the conditions under which political order is produced and sustained.

Event-centered approaches have generated important analytical insights, particularly by foregrounding proximate triggers and actor-level decision-making. They have helped clarify how misperception, commitment problems, and strategic interaction can precipitate rapid escalation once violence is underway. At the same time, this focus tends to obscure the temporal processes through which violence progressively reorganizes institutions, degrades information environments, and reshapes coordination structures [3]. As a result, escalation often appears retrospectively as a sudden breakdown or miscalculation, rather than as the outcome of longer trajectories through which the capacity for non-coercive coordination is incrementally undermined. As recent scholarship has emphasized, war is not simply something that happens at a particular moment; it is something that becomes through the sedimentation of practices, expectations, and coercive relations that transform political life over time [6].

A related limitation concerns how escalation is temporally framed. While extensive literature documents how conflicts unfold and intensify, it remains difficult to specify when escalation constitutes variation within an existing order and when it marks a qualitative reorganization of the system itself. In practice, escalation is frequently treated as reversible by default, with de-escalation imagined as a symmetric process operating in reverse. Empirical research, however, points to persistent asymmetries. Institutions weakened by violence rarely recover easily, trust erodes unevenly across actors, and coercive practices often endure long after formal hostilities subside [2]. These patterns challenge accounts that implicitly treat war as a reversible event or equilibrium outcome, rather than as a systemic transformation with enduring consequences [4].

The difficulty here is not simply empirical but ontological. Event-centered frameworks implicitly assume that escalation unfolds within a relatively stable configuration of institutions, informational environments, and coordination mechanisms. Violence is treated as something that stresses or disrupts this configuration, but not as something that fundamentally reorganizes it. As a consequence, war is frequently conceptualized as an

episodic failure of governance or a deviation from an otherwise coherent political order. Such assumptions obscure how escalation actively reshapes the conditions under which political authority, coordination, and compliance are produced.

This article advances a transformation-centered perspective on escalation. Instead of defining war through violence thresholds, legal categories, or outcome variables, escalation is approached as a temporal process through which the organization of political authority, information, and coordination is progressively reconfigured [7]. This re-framing does not displace strategic interaction or actor-level decision-making. Bargaining failures, commitment problems, and misperceptions remain central to conflict dynamics. What changes over the course of escalation are the conditions under which such interactions take place. As violence reorganizes institutions and information environments, mechanisms that may account for isolated outbreaks of violence become insufficient to explain sustained escalation and persistence.

Reconceptualizing escalation in this way has important implications for how security is analyzed and governed. If war is understood not as a sequence of discrete events but as a process of systemic reorganization, then prevention and early intervention cannot be reduced to reacting to incidents or forecasting short-term changes in violence intensity. Instead, they require attention to the trajectories through which political systems lose the capacity to absorb stress without resorting to coercion. Crucially, practices mobilized in the name of prevention, anticipatory monitoring, emergency stabilization, and preventive coercion, are not external to these trajectories. They are embedded within them and may themselves contribute to eroding the institutional and informational conditions that make non-coercive coordination possible. This tension has been central to critical debates on anticipation, resilience, and security governance [8,9].

Recent scholarship in security studies has moved toward more processual and temporally sensitive understandings of violence, emphasizing becoming, practice, and the governance of uncertainty. These contributions have challenged static and linear models of escalation, highlighting how futures are anticipated, managed, and enacted in the present. Yet even these approaches often retain an event-centered horizon. They remain oriented toward detecting outcomes, preventing breakdowns, or sustaining functionality, rather than toward diagnosing when the underlying regime of political coordination is being transformed.

The consequence is a persistent analytical gap. Escalation is widely recognized as non-linear, interactive, path-dependent, and historically contingent, particularly in studies on crisis bargaining, civil war escalation, political violence, and process-oriented security studies [4,10–13]. Yet there remains limited conceptual clarity about how to distinguish escalation as variation within an existing political order from escalation as transformation of that order. Without such a distinction, it becomes difficult to theorize irreversibility, explain asymmetric de-escalation, or identify when political systems have crossed into a qualitatively different mode of governance. War appears either everywhere, always in the making, or nowhere, always reducible to miscalculation or failure.

This article addresses that gap by shifting the analytical focus from events to regimes. Building on work on resilience, civil resistance, political violence, and community responses to armed conflict, it advances a more specific claim: escalation should be understood as a regime-level transformation driven by the progressive loss of adaptive political capacity, understood as the ability of a political system to sustain non-coercive coordination under conditions of stress [14]. As this capacity erodes, political order is increasingly reorganized around coercion, generating dynamics of path dependence, irreversibility, and temporal asymmetry that cannot be captured by event-centered accounts.

The sections that follow develop this argument in three steps. The next section situates the framework within existing debates on temporality, resilience, and anticipation in security studies, identifying both their contributions and their limits. The subsequent sections advance an explicit ontological account of escalation as regime transformation and theorize the mechanisms through which political systems lose adaptive capacity over time. The analysis is illustrated through a set of interpretative vignettes that trace recurrent patterns of institutional erosion, informational degradation, and coordination breakdown across diverse conflict settings. The concluding discussion reflects on the implications of this perspective for security research and governance, particularly for approaches centered on prediction, prevention, and resilience under conditions of persistent violence.

2. Temporality, Resilience, and Anticipation in Security Studies

Over the past two decades, security studies and political violence research have moved toward more temporal, processual, and practice-oriented accounts of war, insecurity, and escalation [6,10,11,13]. Dissatisfaction with linear, event-centered, and equilibrium-oriented models of war has driven scholars to rethink escalation as a process unfolding through time rather than as a sequence of discrete incidents or decisions. Across diverse strands of the literature, violence is increasingly conceptualized as something that emerges, stabilizes, and transforms political life through practices, routines, and anticipatory logics that reshape how insecurity is governed. This shift has significantly expanded the analytical vocabulary of the field, foregrounding becoming, temporality, and the politics of uncertainty as central dimensions of contemporary security.

One influential body of work has approached war and insecurity as processes of becoming rather than as bounded events, emphasizing practices, routines, affective dispositions, material infrastructures, and evolving forms of political subjectivity [6,10,13,15,16]. Practice-oriented and constructivist scholarship has emphasized how violence is enacted through everyday routines, professional repertoires, and material arrangements that blur the boundary between war and peace [15,16]. From this perspective, escalation does not occur at a single moment but unfolds through the gradual normalization of coercive practices and the sedimentation of expectations that render violence increasingly thinkable and legitimate. This literature has made a crucial contribution by displacing rupture-based narratives and reintroducing temporality into the analysis of war.

Relatedly, work on the “becoming” of war has underscored how escalation is constituted through cumulative transformations in political life rather than through abrupt breakdowns. Bousquet, Grove, and Shah [6], for example, show how martial practices emerge through iterative adjustments that reconfigure institutions, bodies, and modes of perception. Such accounts challenge the assumption that war represents an external shock to political order, instead highlighting how violence is assembled through processes that are often incremental, improvised, and distributed across time and space. In doing so, they undermine the analytical primacy of thresholds and discrete turning points that dominate event-centered approaches.

A second strand of scholarship has focused on resilience as a key framework for understanding how political systems endure and adapt in the face of chronic insecurity. Drawing partly on social–ecological systems theory [17–19], resilience-oriented approaches reconceptualize stability not as resistance to disturbance but as the capacity to absorb shocks without undergoing fundamental transformation. Within security studies, this perspective has been mobilized to analyze how societies, infrastructures, and institutions are governed through preparedness, adaptation, and recovery rather than through prevention alone [20,21].

More specific work on resilience to violence and community responses to armed conflict is particularly relevant here. Carpenter’s study of sectarian violence in Baghdad shows

how some communities were able to prevent the local escalation of violence by sustaining non-sectarian self-organization, collective efficacy, communication, and local mechanisms of conflict management [14]. This literature is important because it demonstrates that the capacity to resist escalation is not merely a property of formal institutions, but also of relational, informational, and community-level infrastructures. Notably, Carpenter already draws on the same regime-theoretic vocabulary developed in the social-ecological resilience literature [18], describing how communities work to avoid “crossing into an undesirable system regime” at the neighborhood level. The present article builds on this insight by extending this same theoretical lineage from the neighborhood level to the level of macro-political order, reframing escalation as a regime-level transformation in political coordination.

A related body of work on civil resistance and civilian agency in armed conflict further clarifies how non-coercive coordination can persist under conditions of extreme violence. Studies of civilian self-protection, noncooperation, and local resistance show that civilians and communities are not only objects of violence, but may actively shape the terms under which armed actors operate [22–26]. These contributions are especially valuable for the present argument because they identify concrete practices, local organization, brokerage, refusal, negotiation, and collective discipline, through which coordination can remain possible without defaulting to coercion. At the same time, this article differs from that literature by asking when the broader political order loses the capacity to sustain such non-coercive coordination at the regime level.

Critical scholarship has further demonstrated that resilience operates not merely as an analytical concept but as a political rationality. By framing disruption as normal and unavoidable, resilience redistributes responsibility for insecurity and shifts attention away from structural causes toward adaptive capacities at multiple scales [9,27]. This work has been central in revealing how security governance increasingly privileges endurance, flexibility, and self-management over the elimination of threats. In the context of escalation, resilience frameworks have helped explain how political systems persist through protracted violence without collapsing outright.

A parallel literature on anticipation and preparedness has similarly transformed how time is theorized in security studies. Rather than focusing on past causes or present events, anticipatory approaches examine how futures are governed in advance through risk modelling, scenario planning, early-warning systems, and pre-emptive intervention [8,28]. This work has shown how security practices operate through speculative logics that render uncertain futures actionable in the present, often legitimizing intervention before breakdown becomes visible. Anticipation thus reconfigures temporality by collapsing future threat into present decision-making.

Together, these studies represent a substantial departure from linear and probabilistic models of escalation. They share a commitment to understanding violence as processual, temporally extended, and embedded in practices of governance. They have demonstrated that escalation is rarely a sudden anomaly; instead, it emerges through gradual shifts in how political systems manage uncertainty, threat, and contention. In doing so, they have challenged the analytical dominance of event-based explanations and opened space for more historically sensitive and reflexive accounts of security.

Despite these advances, a shared limitation runs through much of this work. While temporality, resilience, and anticipation problematize linear time and discrete events, they often lack a robust conceptualization of regime-level transformation in political order. War tends to appear in three recurring guises: as an intensification of existing dynamics, as an exceptional rupture that suspends normal governance, or as a failure of adaptive or anti-

patory capacity. What remains under-theorized is war as an endogenous reconfiguration of political order itself.

In the literature on becoming and practice, the emphasis on gradual emergence sometimes renders transformation analytically indeterminate. If war is always “in the making,” it becomes difficult to specify when escalation entails a qualitative reorganization of authority and coordination rather than the continuation of existing practices. Questions of irreversibility, lock-in, and structural asymmetry often remain implicit, addressed descriptively rather than theorized explicitly [6]. As a result, escalation risks appearing ubiquitous but analytically elusive.

Resilience-oriented approaches face a related difficulty. By conceptualizing stability as adaptive capacity, resilience frameworks tend to treat escalation as indefinitely manageable through adjustment and learning. While this perspective usefully highlights how political systems endure stress, it often struggles to articulate the point at which adaptation gives way to transformation. Escalation appears as a matter of degree rather than kind, obscuring the fact that adaptive responses themselves contribute to the consolidation of more coercive modes of governance. In this sense, resilience can normalize prolonged disruption without providing criteria for diagnosing when political order has been fundamentally reconfigured.

Anticipatory approaches encounter a different but complementary limitation. Despite their focus on futures and uncertainty, many anticipatory frameworks remain oriented toward discrete outcomes. Early-warning systems, risk indicators, and predictive models typically aim to detect imminent violence or instability [29]. While such tools are valuable for short-horizon forecasting, they offer limited leverage for diagnosing slow, path-dependent processes through which the conditions for political coordination erode before overt escalation. Anticipation often remains at the level of signals and preparation, rather than engaging with the transformation of the political environment in which those signals acquire meaning.

Taken together, these studies converge on a crucial intuition: escalation cannot be adequately understood as a simple accumulation of violent events. Yet they offer limited tools for distinguishing between escalation that remains within an existing political order and escalation that transforms that order. Without such a distinction, it becomes challenging to theorize why de-escalation is often asymmetric, why post-conflict environments remain fragile despite reduced violence, or why preventive interventions sometimes stabilize coercive coordination rather than reversing escalation.

This limitation is particularly consequential for debates on security governance. Practices of resilience and anticipation are frequently mobilized as solutions to escalation, promising to enhance preparedness and adaptability under uncertainty. However, if escalation involves the contraction of political coordination space rather than merely increased volatility, then such practices may operate within increasingly constrained environments. Resilience may sustain functionality while narrowing the conditions for non-coercive coordination, and anticipation may optimize responses within a regime already oriented toward enforcement. In both cases, governance instruments risk becoming self-reinforcing elements of escalation dynamics rather than external correctives.

What is missing, therefore, is an explicit framework that articulates temporality, irreversibility, and regime transformation in a unified way. Existing approaches illuminate how violence unfolds through time and how insecurity is governed under conditions of uncertainty, but they rarely specify when escalation crosses from variation into transformation. War appears either as a pathological breakdown to be prevented or as a diffuse process without clear analytical boundaries. Neither perspective adequately captures the durable reorganization of political authority, coordination, and compliance that characterizes large-scale armed conflict.

This article addresses that gap by conceptualizing escalation as a regime-level transformation driven by the progressive loss of adaptive political capacity. Rather than treating institutions, information, and authority as static backgrounds to escalation, the framework developed here treats them as capacities that are endogenously reshaped by violence. Escalation is thus understood as a temporal process through which the space of political coordination contracts, producing path dependence, irreversibility, and asymmetric de-escalation. By integrating insights from temporality, resilience, and anticipation into an explicit ontology of regime transformation, the analysis offers a way to diagnose when political order is being reorganized around coercion rather than merely stressed by it.

The following section develops this ontological re-framing in detail, conceptualizing war as a shift between regimes of governance characterized by distinct configurations of authority, coordination, and coercion.

3. Escalation as Regime Transformation: Adaptive Capacity, Coordination, and Irreversibility

This section develops the article's core theoretical contribution: an ontological and processual account of escalation as regime transformation. Rather than treating war as a threshold outcome, a bargaining failure, or an episodic collapse of order, escalation is conceptualized as a temporal process through which the conditions of political coordination are progressively reorganized. War, in this account, marks the consolidation of a distinct regime of governance in which coercion becomes the dominant mode of coordination, authority, and compliance.

3.1. War as Regime Shift, Not Outcome

Approaching war as a regime shift requires an explicit clarification of what is meant by regime in this context. The term is not used here in the narrower sense of formal international regimes, institutionalized cooperation, or regime-type classifications. Rather, it is used in a broader ontological and processual sense to refer to a relatively stable configuration of political coordination through which authority is exercised, conflict is mediated, and compliance is produced [30,31]. Regimes are therefore not defined by formal institutional arrangements alone, but by the patterned interaction of institutions, information environments, and enforcement practices that together structure political order over time.

In this article, non-coercive coordination refers to the capacity of political actors to produce order through institutional mediation, credible information, negotiated compliance, and relational intermediacy rather than through threat, force, or enforcement as the primary mode of rule. Coercive coordination, by contrast, refers to a mode of political ordering in which compliance is increasingly secured through enforcement, emergency authority, surveillance, intimidation, or force. The article uses these terms consistently to distinguish between coordination mechanisms, while reserving "security governance" for the broader field of practices through which insecurity is governed.

From this perspective, war does not represent the breakdown or suspension of political order. Instead, it signals the emergence of a different mode of order, characterized by a reweighting of coordination mechanisms. In low-coercion regimes, political coordination relies primarily on institutional mediation, shared informational frameworks, and legitimacy-compatible compliance. Coercion exists, but it is episodic, bounded, and typically subordinated to other modes of governance. By contrast, in regimes of war, coercion becomes the primary and self-reinforcing means through which order is produced. Authority is increasingly exercised through enforcement rather than mediation, and compliance is secured through threat and force rather than shared expectations or negotiated legitimacy.

Conceptualizing war as a regime shift clarifies several long-standing puzzles in escalation research. First, it explains why war often appears abrupt at the level of events while being deeply rooted in longer processes of institutional erosion and political reconfiguration. Near regime boundaries, relatively small disturbances can trigger disproportionate effects as stabilizing feedbacks weaken and sensitivity to disruption increases [7]. Second, it accounts for the temporal asymmetry of escalation and de-escalation. While escalation may proceed incrementally, de-escalation rarely retraces the same path in reverse, because the underlying configuration of coordination has been transformed.

This ontological reframing also resolves a recurring ambiguity in the literature: whether war should be understood as an intensification of existing dynamics or as a qualitatively distinct condition. From a regime perspective, both can be true. Escalation may unfold entirely within a regime, producing variation without transformation. War emerges when escalation reorganizes the regime itself, when the conditions that sustain mediated, information-rich, and legitimacy-based coordination are displaced by coercive coordination as the dominant organizing principle.

3.2. Escalation as Loss of Adaptive Political Capacity

If war is conceptualized as a regime shift, escalation cannot be understood simply as an increase in violence intensity or frequency. Instead, escalation must be theorized as a process that alters what a political system is able to do under conditions of stress. This section introduces the paper's central mechanism: escalation as a progressive loss of adaptive political capacity.

Adaptive political capacity is defined here as the collective ability of a political system to sustain non-coercive coordination in the face of disruption. Drawing on resilience-oriented traditions that conceptualize stability as the capacity to absorb disturbance without undergoing qualitative transformation [17–19], adaptive capacity refers not to endurance per se but to recoverability. A system with high adaptive capacity can absorb shocks while preserving the conditions required for mediated, reversible, and legitimacy-compatible governance. A system that loses adaptive capacity may remain governable in the short term, but only by substituting coercive enforcement for other coordination mechanisms.

Under this framework, escalation corresponds to a contraction of adaptive political capacity over time. As violence intensifies across multiple modalities, physical force, repression, intimidation, and information manipulation, the infrastructures that sustain non-coercive coordination deteriorate. Institutional mediation weakens, information environments fragment, and relational intermediacy collapses. Importantly, this contraction is endogenous. Escalation does not unfold within a fixed political environment; it actively reshapes that environment, narrowing the range of feasible, credible, and legitimate responses available to political actors.

This perspective extends and reframes classic arguments in the conflict literature. Rationalist approaches emphasize information asymmetries and commitment problems as causes of war [32]. The loss-of-capacity framework highlights how escalation itself degrades information integrity and enforcement credibility, thereby tightening commitment constraints and narrowing bargaining space. Commitment problems and misperceptions are thus not merely antecedents of war; they are emergent properties of declining adaptive political capacity.

3.3. Adaptive Capacity as Coordination Space

To operationalize adaptive political capacity, it is helpful to conceptualize it as a system's coordination space: the range of pathways through which political order can be produced without defaulting to coercion. Concrete infrastructures rather than abstract

norms constitute coordination space. It reflects the availability of mediating institutions, shared informational frameworks, and relational configurations that enable restraint, compromise, and reversible settlement.

Analytically, coordination space has three interdependent dimensions.

The first is institutional. Institutional coordination refers to the presence of procedures, forums, and authorities capable of mediating conflict through adjudication, negotiation, and rule-based decision-making. Courts, legislatures, administrative bodies, and third-party mediators play a central role in absorbing contention by translating disputes into governable forms. When these institutions retain credibility and authority, political systems can manage escalation without resorting to force. As escalation unfolds, however, repeated reliance on emergency powers and coercive enforcement weakens institutional mediation. Institutions may persist formally while losing their restraining capacity, becoming sites for ratifying enforcement decisions rather than mediating conflict.

The second dimension is informational. Non-coercive coordination depends on minimally shared informational environments in which signals can function as common knowledge rather than strategic noise. Escalation degrades this capacity through propaganda, censorship, intimidation, and the fragmentation of media ecosystems [33,34]. As information loses credibility, intentions become opaque, and verification gives way to inference and suspicion. Under such conditions, restraint becomes difficult to signal and interpret, and force increasingly substitutes for communication as a means of producing predictability.

The third dimension is relational. Political coordination relies on relational structures that allow for coalition fluidity, brokerage, and intermediacy. Cross-cutting ties enable actors to occupy intermediate positions, broker compromises, and dampen polarization. Escalation hardens alignments, collapses intermediacy, and raises the costs of neutrality or defection [2]. As relational space contracts, political competition becomes increasingly binary, and coercion becomes a means of enforcing alignment rather than managing contention.

These three dimensions are analytically distinct but dynamically intertwined. Deterioration in one amplifies stress in the others. Institutional erosion undermines information credibility; informational fragmentation hardens relational alignments; relational polarization weakens institutional mediation. Adaptive political capacity thus declines not linearly, but through reinforcing feedbacks that progressively narrow coordination space.

3.4. Self-Conditioning Dynamics and Endogenized Constraints

A key implication of this framework is that escalation operates through self-conditioning dynamics. As political systems respond to stress by substituting coercive enforcement for mediated coordination, they do not merely react to external shocks; they actively reshape the conditions under which future political action must occur. In this sense, escalation is endogenously transformative.

This dynamic can be understood as a form of political niche construction [35,36]. Actors do not merely adapt to a given environment of insecurity; through repeated coercive responses, they reshape the institutional, informational, and relational conditions under which subsequent action becomes possible. Emergency measures, exceptional legal frameworks, surveillance infrastructures, and enforcement-oriented practices introduced to manage immediate threats accumulate into a political environment increasingly organized around coercion. Over time, this constructed environment constrains the range of responses that remain feasible, credible, and legitimate, making non-coercive coordination progressively harder to enact and sustain.

Self-conditioning dynamics differ from simple path dependence. Rather than emphasizing increasing returns to a fixed institutional choice, they highlight how the space of political possibility is progressively reconfigured through practice. What becomes entrenched

is not a single policy or institution, but a regime logic in which coercion is normalized as the most reliable response to uncertainty. As this logic consolidates, non-coercive alternatives become not only politically contested but structurally complex to enact.

3.5. Temporal Asymmetry and Path Dependence

Understanding escalation as loss of adaptive capacity clarifies why escalation and de-escalation are temporally asymmetric. Escalation can proceed incrementally through adaptive substitutions that appear pragmatically justified at each step. De-escalation, by contrast, requires the reconstitution of coordination space: rebuilding institutional mediation, restoring informational integrity, and reopening relational intermediacy. These processes are typically slower, more contested, and more uncertain than the adaptations that produced escalation.

This asymmetry produces path dependence. Each step toward coercive coordination alters the baseline from which subsequent decisions must be made [37]. Measures that stabilize order in the short term—emergency powers, centralized enforcement, pre-emptive intervention—reshape expectations and incentives in ways that privilege coercion going forward. Even when violence subsides, the political environment remains structured by these adaptations, constraining the feasibility of reversal.

3.6. Irreversibility, Hysteresis, and Lock-In

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is irreversibility. Irreversibility does not imply inevitability, but hysteresis: reductions in violence or the removal of proximate triggers do not automatically restore prior conditions of political coordination. Institutions degraded by prolonged enforcement do not regain credibility overnight; informational environments fragmented by propaganda do not rapidly re-converge; relational trust eroded by polarization does not spontaneously reappear.

These dynamics generate lock-in at the regime level [38]. Once political order is reorganized around coercive coordination, feedback loops emerge that reinforce the new regime's logic. Institutional routines, security practices, and resource allocations become aligned with enforcement. Exiting such a regime entails redistributive and political costs that actors embedded within it may resist [39]. War thus persists not simply because violence continues, but because a coercive regime has been consolidated.

3.7. Escalation as Variation Versus Escalation as Transformation

This framework enables a critical analytical distinction. Escalation as variation refers to increases in violence that remain absorbable within an existing regime of political coordination. Escalation as transformation occurs when the mechanisms that sustain non-coercive coordination are displaced, and coercion becomes the dominant organizing principle of political order.

This distinction cannot be identified through violence metrics alone. It requires attention to regime properties: the state of institutional mediation, information integrity, and relational intermediacy. Escalation crosses into war not when violence becomes "too much," but when political coordination is reorganized around coercion in ways that are temporally asymmetric and difficult to reverse.

Adopting this ontology makes escalation-as-variation and escalation-as-transformation empirically distinguishable. It shifts analysis away from thresholds and events toward trajectories of capacity loss and regime consolidation. The following section illustrates these dynamics through a set of interpretative vignettes that trace how regime transformation becomes recognizable across diverse conflict settings.

4. From Escalation to War: Interpretative Vignettes of Regime Transformation

The preceding section conceptualized escalation as a regime-level transformation driven by the progressive loss of adaptive political capacity. This section renders that framework empirically legible through a set of interpretative vignettes. The vignettes do not function as case studies, nor do they map individual concepts onto discrete empirical instances. Instead, they operate as analytical devices designed to trace how the mechanisms identified earlier, capacity loss, contraction of coordination space, self-conditioning dynamics, and temporal asymmetry, interact over time across diverse conflict settings. Their purpose is not causal explanation by enumeration, but pattern recognition: to show how war emerges as a regime of governance when coercion becomes the dominant mode of political coordination. The section closes with an illustrative application to the Gaza War (2023–2025), which permits partial empirical anchoring of the informational dimension of coordination space destruction through independently documented data on journalistic infrastructure elimination.

Importantly, the vignettes do not imply a universal sequence or necessary progression. Not all escalation trajectories pass through each pattern, nor do they do so in a fixed order. Some processes stabilize before regime transformation consolidates; others accelerate unevenly across institutional, informational, and relational domains. What is analytically significant is not the presence of any single element, but the recognizable configuration that emerges when multiple coordination mechanisms are progressively reorganized around coercion. Read together, the vignettes illustrate how escalation becomes war not at a single moment, but through cumulative transformations that render non-coercive coordination increasingly difficult to sustain.

4.1. *Erosion of Institutional Mediation*

In many escalation trajectories, early episodes of violence are initially managed through existing institutional arrangements. Courts, legislatures, administrative bodies, and negotiated forums continue to operate, even as they are placed under strain. Emergency legislation, special jurisdictions, or temporary security measures are often introduced with the stated aim of restoring order while preserving institutional mediation. At this stage, escalation remains compatible with an existing regime of governance: institutions still structure political contention, and coercion functions as a bounded instrument rather than a dominant logic.

Over time, however, repeated reliance on coercive enforcement alters how institutions function in practice. Emergency powers are renewed, procedural safeguards are relaxed, and decision-making authority is increasingly centralized. Institutions do not necessarily disappear, but their mediating role is progressively displaced. Courts become sites for ratifying enforcement decisions rather than adjudicating disputes; legislatures authorize exceptional measures with limited deliberation; negotiation mechanisms lose credibility as commitments become difficult to guarantee [40,41].

What matters here is not institutional collapse, but institutional re-specification. As escalation unfolds, institutions adapt to operate under conditions of low trust, fragmented information, and heightened threat. These adaptations may stabilize order in the short term, but they do so by narrowing the range of disputes that can be mediated without coercion. Over time, actors learn that institutional channels are unreliable for securing outcomes, while enforcement becomes comparatively more effective. The erosion of mediation thus reflects a contraction of coordination space rather than a simple failure of institutions.

The regime boundary is approached when institutional mediation no longer sets the terms of conflict management. At that point, institutions persist formally but function

primarily as extensions of coercive coordination. Escalation becomes difficult to reverse because rebuilding mediating capacity requires not only institutional reform, but the restoration of credibility, procedural trust, and reversible commitment, conditions that have been systematically undermined.

4.2. Information Degradation and the Collapse of Common Knowledge

A second recurrent pattern concerns the degradation of informational environments. Early in escalation, information may become contested but remains partially shareable. Competing narratives coexist, and signals of restraint or compromise can still function as common knowledge. As escalation intensifies, however, informational practices increasingly shift toward propaganda, censorship, intimidation, and strategic misinformation [33,34]. Journalistic infrastructures weaken, verification becomes difficult, and rumor substitutes for evidence.

The critical transformation is not simply the spread of false information, but the erosion of what this article calls shared interpretive anchors: the institutionalized, communicative, and evidentiary reference points that allow actors to verify claims, interpret signals, attribute responsibility, and form minimally overlapping expectations. These anchors may include trusted journalistic infrastructures, credible monitoring mechanisms, shared legal categories, recognized mediators, or institutional procedures for public verification. As informational environments fragment, actors no longer inhabit overlapping worlds of meaning. Signals lose credibility, intentions become opaque, and ambiguity is routinely interpreted as a threat. Under such conditions, even conciliatory actions may be discounted or reframed as deception [4]. Communication ceases to reliably coordinate expectations, and coercion increasingly substitutes for signaling as a means of producing predictability.

This degradation has profound implications for escalation dynamics. Information loss amplifies commitment problems by making restraint difficult to demonstrate and trust costly to extend. Anticipatory practices, such as pre-emptive enforcement or precautionary intervention, become rational responses to uncertainty, even as they further degrade the informational environment. The system thus enters a self-conditioning loop: actions taken to manage informational uncertainty deepen that uncertainty, reinforcing reliance on coercion.

The regime shift becomes visible when information no longer functions as a coordination mechanism at scale. At that point, escalation is no longer driven primarily by misperception or misinformation, but by the structural absence of communicative infrastructures capable of sustaining non-coercive coordination.

4.3. Hardening of Alignments and Contraction of Relational Space

Escalation also reshapes the political order by contracting relational coordination space. In early stages, political alignments often remain fluid. Actors can broker compromises, defect from coalitions, or occupy intermediate positions without prohibitive cost. Cross-cutting ties allow disputes to be localized and absorbed without polarizing the system as a whole. As violence intensifies, however, polarization hardens identities and reduces the viability of intermediacy [2].

Relational contraction occurs as neutrality becomes untenable and brokerage increasingly risky. Actors who previously mediated across divides are discredited, coerced, or targeted; moderation becomes legible as complicity. Coalition diversity collapses, and political competition aligns along increasingly binary lines. Under such conditions, coercion functions not only to suppress opposition, but to enforce alignment and discipline internal dissent [42].

This pattern is analytically distinct from ideological polarization alone. What changes is not simply belief or identity, but the relational architecture of political coordination. As relational space contracts, the system loses degrees of freedom: fewer combinations remain available for stabilization, and fewer actors can absorb shocks without escalating commitment. The loss of relational intermediacy thus directly contributes to a loss of adaptive capacity by reducing the system's ability to reconfigure under stress.

The regime boundary is crossed when hardened alignment becomes a condition of participation in political life. At that point, escalation is no longer a contingent outcome of crisis politics, but a structural feature of a political order organized around coercive bloc enforcement.

4.4. Normalization of Coercion as a Mode of Governance

Across many escalation trajectories, coercion initially appears as an exceptional response to exceptional circumstances. Emergency measures are framed as temporary, targeted, and reversible. Over time, however, such measures are normalized and extended into new domains of governance. Surveillance practices expand, discretionary enforcement increases, and coercive authority becomes embedded in routine administration [43,44].

Normalization operates through temporal drift rather than dramatic rupture. What begins as crisis management gradually becomes standard operating procedure. Coercion shifts from being an instrument among others to the default means of securing compliance under uncertainty. This transformation is often justified in the language of resilience or stabilization: coercive measures are defended as necessary to preserve order, functionality, or social endurance under stress [20].

The analytical significance of normalization lies in its effect on recoverability. Once coercive coordination becomes routine, alternatives lose institutional support, professional expertise, and political legitimacy. Mediating practices atrophy, informational infrastructures are reoriented toward surveillance rather than communication, and relational trust erodes further. Escalation thus consolidates not through escalating violence alone, but through the routinization of coercive coordination across political domains.

The emergence of war as a regime becomes evident when coercion no longer requires exceptional justification. At that point, governance is organized around enforcement by default, and de-escalation entails not merely reducing violence but dismantling entrenched coercive infrastructures.

4.5. Emergency Legalism and Jurisdictional Drift

Contrary to accounts that portray war as the suspension of law, escalation often proceeds through the proliferation and transformation of legal frameworks. Jurisdictional drift refers here to the gradual movement of decision-making authority from deliberative, mediating, or rights-constraining institutions toward emergency, security, or enforcement-oriented authorities. It does not require the formal suspension of law; rather, it occurs when legal frameworks are progressively reinterpreted, expanded, or reorganized to stabilize coercive coordination. Emergency provisions, exceptional jurisdictions, and security-oriented interpretations of legality expand to accommodate coercive practices [41,45]. Law does not disappear; it is reoriented.

Early in escalation, emergency legal measures are introduced as temporary deviations from standard procedure. Over time, repeated renewal and judicial accommodation transform their function. Legal frameworks increasingly stabilize enforcement rather than constrain it, providing administrative legibility and political authorization for coercive coordination [8]. Jurisdictional drift shifts authority away from deliberative institutions toward those optimized for rapid intervention and threat management.

This process generates legal hysteresis. Even when violence subsides, emergency provisions persist as precedents, administrative routines, and interpretive defaults. Law remains formally intact, yet its coordinating role changes: it ceases to function primarily as an infrastructure for reversible settlement and becomes a mechanism for routinizing coercion. The regime shift is consolidated not through legal breakdown, but through legal transformation.

4.6. Material and Political–Economic Consolidation

Finally, escalation reshapes political order through material and organizational realignment. As coercive coordination expands, resources, expertise, and institutional capacity are redirected toward enforcement functions. Security apparatuses grow, budgets are reallocated, and organizational ecosystems adapt to the demands of coercive coordination [46].

These material shifts generate dependencies that stabilize high-coercion regimes. Actors adapt to new incentive structures, recalibrating behavior in ways that further entrench enforcement-oriented governance. Over time, the infrastructures required for non-coercive coordination—mediation services, oversight mechanisms, and deliberative institutions—are hollowed out or marginalized. Adaptive political capacity thus erodes not only symbolically or institutionally but also materially.

This consolidation produces lock-in [37]. Exiting a high-coercion regime entails redistributive costs that threaten established interests and organizational hierarchies. Even where violence declines, these dependencies impede recovery, rendering de-escalation politically costly and structurally constrained [39]. War persists not simply because violence continues, but because a coercive regime has acquired institutional and material depth.

4.7. War as the Consolidation of Coercive Coordination

Taken together, these vignettes illustrate how escalation becomes war through the cumulative reorganization of political coordination. Institutional mediation erodes, information ceases to coordinate expectations, relational intermediacy collapses, coercion is normalized, legality is reoriented, and material infrastructures consolidate around enforcement. None of these transformations alone constitutes war. It is their interaction, accumulation, and self-conditioning that produce a regime in which coercion becomes the dominant logic of governance.

This perspective clarifies why war cannot be reduced to breakdown, miscalculation, or failure. War emerges when the conditions for non-coercive coordination are progressively exhausted, rendering coercive coordination not only dominant but necessary within the transformed political order. Escalation thus becomes regime transformation when variation gives way to reconfiguration, when the space of political possibility is reshaped in ways that are temporally asymmetric and difficult to reverse.

The next section turns to the implications of this perspective for security governance, examining how practices of anticipation and resilience operate under conditions of contracted coordination space, and how they may either mitigate or inadvertently reinforce regime transformation.

4.8. An Illustrative Application: Informational Environment Destruction in the Gaza War (2023–2025)

The interpretative patterns developed in Sections 4.1–4.6 are not confined to historical or hypothetical settings. The war in Gaza following the October 2023 attacks offers a contemporaneous instance in which several of these patterns are simultaneously observable, and in which at least one dimension of coordination space, the informational, admits direct empirical documentation. The following analysis does not function as a case study in the causal or comparative sense, nor does it advance a political judgment regarding the

parties to the conflict. Its purpose is not to establish intentionality, legal responsibility, or comparative uniqueness across all dimensions of conflict violence, but to demonstrate how the destruction of communicative infrastructures becomes analytically legible within the proposed framework of regime transformation. Similar dynamics may emerge in other conflicts under conditions of severe informational degradation, even where empirical documentation remains more limited. Rather, the section applies the framework developed above to examine how regime transformation becomes recognizable in a context where coercive forms of coordination have progressively displaced the conditions necessary for non-coercive coordination.

The informational dimension is analytically foregrounded here for a specific reason: it is the only one for which the destruction of coordination infrastructure can be measured through verifiable, independently collected data, rather than inferred from political or institutional indicators that remain contested. As Section 4.2 established, the critical transformation in the informational domain is not the spread of false information per se, but the elimination of the communicative infrastructure through which signals can function as common knowledge. Journalists, in this framework, are not incidental casualties of conflict. They constitute a core component of the infrastructures through which political actors, civilian populations, and international interlocutors share interpretive frameworks, verify claims, and signal intent. Their large-scale loss is therefore not merely a press freedom issue; it is a structural transformation in the conditions of political coordination itself. It contributes to the formation of a coercive informational niche: a constructed political environment in which public verification, attribution, and mutual expectation are no longer reliably sustained by journalistic and institutional infrastructures. In this sense, the destruction of the informational environment is not merely a consequence of war but part of the political niche through which coercive coordination becomes entrenched. It progressively reduces the system's capacity to return to a political order not structured by armed conflict. The result is a form of sociopolitical hysteresis: the system does not simply revert once the immediate shock recedes, because the infrastructures through which public verification, attribution, and mutual expectation were previously organized have themselves been degraded.

The scale of this transformation in Gaza is without historical precedent for the period in which systematic data have been available. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 68 journalists and media workers were killed in Gaza during the three months following 7 October 2023, more than had ever been killed in a single country over the course of an entire year [47,48]. CPJ also reported that, in 2024, an additional 85 journalists were killed, constituting the deadliest annual toll ever recorded by the organization globally. In 2025, the figure reached 86, including deaths that occurred after the October ceasefire came into effect [49,50]. As the Watson Institute's Costs of War Project concluded, the number of journalists killed in Gaza since October 2023 surpasses the combined total recorded across the US Civil War, the First and Second World Wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Yugoslav Wars, and the war in Afghanistan [51].

This pattern has also been documented by PRIO, which notes that, since the beginning of the war in Gaza, the deaths of journalists and United Nations personnel have ceased to appear exceptional and have instead become a recurrent feature of the conflict's operational dynamics [52]. Although the phenomenon of journalist fatalities is not unique to Gaza, the scale observed in this conflict substantially exceeds that reported for the other armed conflicts examined in Figure 1. This becomes even more evident in Figure 2, which presents the journalist fatality rate calculated as the number of journalist deaths relative to the duration of the conflict. At the time of writing, these dynamics remain ongoing. The conflict in Gaza may therefore constitute a singular contemporary case when examined against

global annual patterns of journalist casualties. An analysis of the number of journalists and media workers killed per unit of time further illustrates the disproportionate intensity of this conflict since 2023 (see Figure 3).

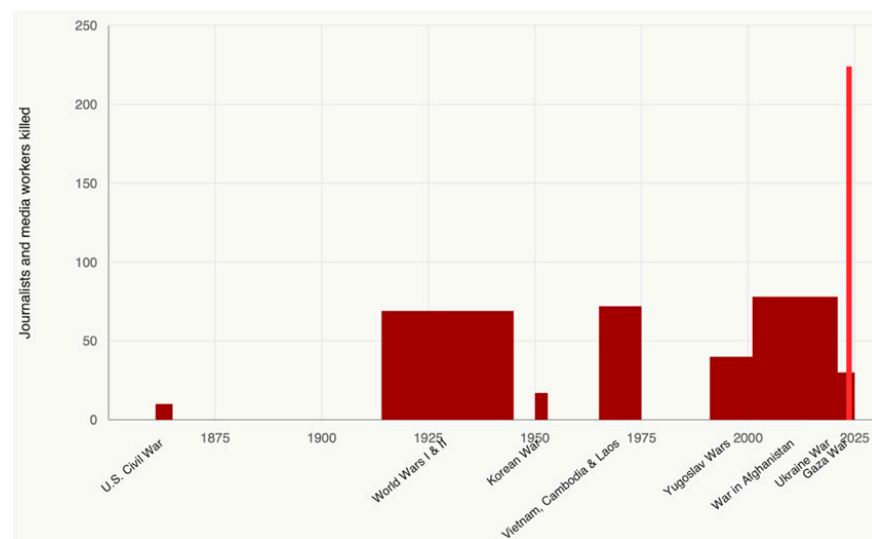


Figure 1. Historical comparison of journalist and media worker fatalities across major armed conflicts. The figure contrasts the reported number of journalists and media workers killed in selected conflicts from the nineteenth century to the present, including the U.S. Civil War, the World Wars, Korea, Vietnam and Cambodia, the Yugoslav Wars, Afghanistan, Ukraine, and the Gaza War. The Gaza conflict (2023–2025), in red, exhibits an exceptionally high concentration of journalist fatalities over a comparatively short temporal interval, exceeding the levels documented for other major conflicts represented in the figure [51].

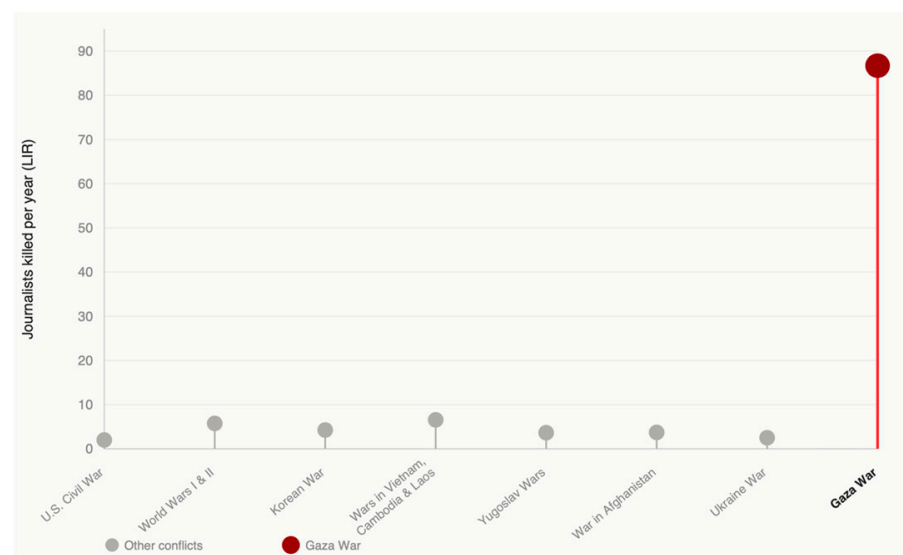


Figure 2. Journalist fatality rate across major armed conflicts, measured as the number of journalists and media workers killed per year of conflict duration. While previous conflicts exhibit relatively low annualized fatality rates, the Gaza War (2023–2025) emerges as a significant outlier, displaying a disproportionately elevated journalist fatality rate over a markedly compressed temporal interval. This pattern suggests an unprecedented concentration of informational infrastructure destruction in contemporary conflict conditions. Data compiled from [51].

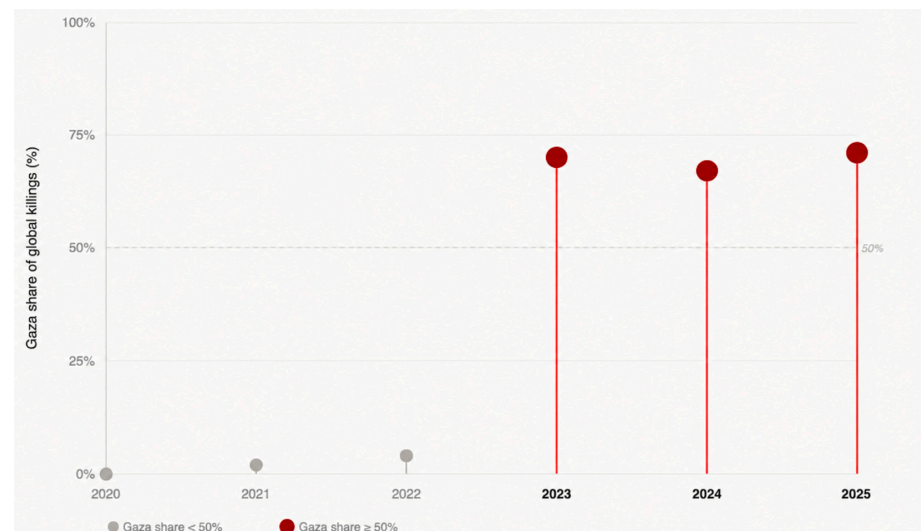


Figure 3. Proportion of global journalist and media worker fatalities attributable to the Gaza War between 2020 and 2025. The figure shows the percentage of worldwide journalist killings occurring in Gaza relative to total annual global journalist fatalities. Prior to 2023, Gaza represented a negligible share of global journalist deaths. Beginning in 2023, however, the conflict accounted for more than two-thirds of all journalist and media worker fatalities recorded worldwide, remaining above the 50% threshold through 2025. This concentration indicates an unprecedented centralization of journalist casualties within a single conflict zone in the contemporary period [53].

The significance of these data for the framework developed in this article lies not in its humanitarian dimension, grave as that is, but in what it signals about the destruction of coordination infrastructure. Gaza's pre-war informational environment, while constrained by a long-standing blockade, retained functional journalistic capacity: the Gaza Strip had an active press corps, operational media facilities, and a Health Information System that served as a regional model for data collection under adverse conditions. The systematic destruction of this infrastructure, through the killing of journalists, the targeting of approximately 48 media facilities documented by CPJ, the sustained ban on independent international media access [54], and the destruction of the primary national health data centre at Al-Shifa Hospital in early 2024, progressively eliminated the conditions under which information could function as a coordination mechanism [55,56].

The self-conditioning dynamic identified in Section 3.4 is particularly visible here. As the informational environment degraded, the ability of actors to signal restraint, verify claims, or demonstrate compliance with negotiated commitments became structurally impaired. This did not merely complicate diplomacy at the margins; it altered the basic conditions under which the distinction between combatant and civilian, between targeted and incidental harm, between compliance and violation, could be established and communicated. Coercion substituted for communication not as a tactical preference but as a structural consequence of the elimination of the communicative infrastructure that coordination requires. The result is precisely the self-conditioning loop the framework predicts: informational destruction deepens uncertainty, uncertainty intensifies reliance on enforcement, and enforcement further degrades the conditions for non-coercive signaling.

The temporal asymmetry identified in Section 3.5 is also observable in the post-ceasefire period. The October 2025 ceasefire reduced overt violence, but the informational infrastructure destroyed over two years of conflict did not reconstitute itself at the cessation of hostilities. Journalists continued to be killed after the ceasefire came into effect; international media access remained restricted; the institutional capacity for independent verification remained absent. This is consistent with the framework's claim that

de-escalation does not automatically restore the coordination conditions whose erosion made escalation possible. The political order that emerges from the cessation of violence bears the structural imprint of the regime that violence produced.

The Gaza case thus illustrates, with empirical specificity, the mechanism that Section 4.2 described in general terms: that the destruction of journalistic infrastructure is not an epiphenomenon of war but a constitutive element of regime transformation, one through which the informational conditions for non-coercive coordination are progressively exhausted, and coercive coordination consolidates in their place.

5. Implications: Limits of Anticipation, Resilience, and Escalation Analysis

Understanding escalation as a regime-level transformation is not just a conceptual refinement: it changes how escalation is governed, diagnosed, and addressed in both research and practice. If escalation operates through the progressive contraction of political coordination space, then many contemporary governance frameworks do not fail because they lack data, foresight, or technical sophistication. Instead, they operate within political environments that are already being reorganized, narrowing the range of feasible non-coercive responses. Taking regime dynamics seriously, therefore, requires rethinking not only how escalation is analyzed, but how prevention, stabilization, and resilience are conceptualized under conditions of persistent violence.

5.1. Security Governance Under Contracting Coordination Spaces

Contemporary security governance is increasingly organized around anticipatory and resilience-oriented frameworks. Early-warning systems, scenario planning, stress testing, and preparedness exercises are designed to enhance decision-making under uncertainty by improving foresight and adaptive response. These approaches have generated important insights, particularly by challenging reactive and event-driven models of security [8,28,29]. Yet from the perspective developed in this article, their effectiveness is conditioned by the state of the political coordination space in which they operate.

When adaptive political capacity remains relatively intact, anticipatory governance can support early intervention without defaulting to coercion. Signals of rising tension can be translated into mediated responses, institutional reform, or negotiated adjustment. Under such conditions, anticipation expands political possibility by enabling timely coordination across actors and domains. However, as escalation unfolds and coordination space contracts, anticipation increasingly operates within a narrowed set of options. Forecasts may accurately identify mounting risk while offering responses limited to enforcement-oriented measures, because institutional mediation, informational credibility, and relational intermediacy have already eroded.

This dynamic helps explain why anticipatory governance often appears simultaneously sophisticated and blunt. High-resolution data and advanced modelling coexist with policy responses that default to surveillance, repression, or preventive coercion. The issue is not epistemic failure, but structural constraint. Anticipation cannot reopen political space once the regime itself has shifted toward coercive coordination; it can only make action within that regime more efficient. In other words, anticipatory practices may end up reinforcing coercive regimes by making coercive responses look reasonable and well-organized, even under uncertainty [33,34].

A similar logic applies to resilience-oriented governance. Resilience frameworks emphasize endurance, adaptability, and the capacity to absorb shocks without collapse [17,19,57]. Within security studies, resilience has been mobilized to reframe insecurity as a chronic condition requiring ongoing management rather than definitive resolution [20,21]. This

shift has usefully challenged prevention-centric models that assume threats can be eliminated. Yet resilience also carries a structural blind spot: it tends to prioritize functionality over recoverability.

From the regime perspective developed here, a political system may appear resilient precisely because it has reorganized around coercive coordination. Emergency powers, centralized authority, and expanded enforcement capacity can absorb shocks and maintain order under severe stress. However, these adaptations often further degrade the infrastructures required for non-coercive coordination. Institutional mediation weakens, informational environments fragment, and relational trust erodes. Resilience may stabilize a system in the short term while accelerating long-term regime transformation.

This does not imply that resilience is inherently counterproductive. Instead, it underscores that resilience is not politically neutral. Whether resilience mitigates escalation or consolidates coercive regimes depends on the coordination mechanisms it sustains. When resilience practices reinforce mediation, information integrity, and relational intermediacy, they can preserve adaptive capacity. When they operate primarily through enforcement and emergency authority, they may normalize disruption while narrowing the conditions for political recovery [9,27].

5.2. *Rethinking Escalation Governance Beyond Prevention and Response*

Understanding escalation as regime transformation also challenges dominant assumptions about prevention and intervention. Conventional escalation management often assumes that a timely response to events can prevent war by interrupting causal chains before thresholds are crossed. From this perspective, failure is attributed to delayed action, insufficient information, or miscalculation. The framework developed here suggests a different diagnosis. Escalation may continue not because warning signs are missed, but because the political environment has already changed in ways that limit how effective non-coercive intervention can be.

This perspective helps explain why preventive interventions sometimes appear to “work” while deepening long-term fragility. Measures that suppress violence or restore short-term order may stabilize events without reconstituting coordination space. Ceasefires, emergency deployments, or coercive stabilization may reduce visible conflict while leaving institutional mediation hollowed out, informational environments polarized, and relational alignments hardened. In such contexts, escalation is contained but not reversed; the regime remains oriented toward coercive coordination, making renewed violence likely once pressures re-emerge [18,39].

From a regime perspective, the key governance challenge is not merely to prevent violence, but to preserve or restore the conditions under which non-coercive coordination remains feasible. This requires attention to how interventions reshape institutional authority, informational credibility, and relational architecture over time. Interventions that degrade these capacities, even when framed as preventive, may accelerate regime consolidation rather than avert it.

5.3. *Methodological Implications for Security Studies*

Reframing escalation as regime transformation also carries significant methodological implications for security research. Much empirical work on escalation focuses on predicting events: conflict onset, violence spikes, or transitions between intensity levels. These efforts have produced valuable tools and datasets, particularly in the domain of early warning [29,58]. However, when escalation is understood as a cumulative transformation of political order, event prediction becomes an incomplete metric of analytical success.

The central analytical challenge shifts from forecasting discrete outcomes to diagnosing trajectories of capacity loss. Rather than asking whether violence will occur, regime-oriented analysis asks whether the conditions that sustain non-coercive coordination are being eroded. This requires different indicators and interpretive strategies. In practice, this means asking different questions: not whether institutions formally persist, but whether they still mediate disputes; not how much information circulates, but whether it is credible and widely trusted; and not only what ideological positions actors hold, but how flexible and connected their coalitions remain.

This shift does not displace quantitative or predictive methods, but repositions them within a broader analytical frame. Event prediction may signal when escalation is imminent, but it cannot by itself diagnose whether escalation remains reversible or has crossed into regime transformation. Conversely, regime diagnostics may identify deepening transformation even when violence remains episodic or temporarily suppressed. Integrating these perspectives requires moving from short-horizon prediction toward historically grounded, configuration-sensitive analysis.

Methodologically, this also implies greater attention to temporal asymmetry and hysteresis. Escalation trajectories cannot be inferred solely from changes in violence intensity; they must be situated within more extended sequences of institutional adaptation and political reconfiguration. Comparative research that traces how similar levels of violence produce divergent outcomes depending on coordination capacity may be particularly valuable in this regard.

5.4. Reorienting Escalation Analysis: From Signals to Configurations

Taken together, these implications point toward a broader reorientation of escalation analysis. First, analysis must move from signals to configurations. Early-warning indicators, risk factors, and thresholds remain useful, but they should be interpreted in the context of an assessment of regime configuration. Signals acquire meaning only within the political environments that shape how responses can be coordinated.

Second, escalation analysis must move from thresholds to regime dynamics. Rather than identifying points at which violence becomes “too much”, analysis should examine how political systems transition between regimes of coordination. This puts irreversibility, path dependence, and lock-in at the center of escalation analysis, rather than treating them as unusual exceptions.

Third, the analytical focus must shift from isolated decisions to transformations of the political order. Decisions matter, but their effects depend on the environments in which they are made. Regime-oriented analysis emphasizes how decisions both respond to and reshape the political coordination space, generating self-reinforcing dynamics that constrain future choices.

This reorientation does not deny agency or contingency. On the contrary, it clarifies why agency becomes increasingly constrained over time, and why decisions that appear reasonable in the moment may contribute to longer-term regime consolidation. By situating agency within evolving regime dynamics, escalation analysis can better account for both unintended consequences and structural inertia.

5.5. War as Regime: Political and Normative Implications

Finally, understanding war as a regime of governance carries important political and normative implications. Conceptualizing war as regime transformation does not normalize violence or render it inevitable. Instead, it shifts attention away from narratives of surprise, failure, or exception toward the conditions under which political systems become organized

around coercion. This shift enables a more politically grounded critique of security practices that contribute to regime consolidation under the guise of prevention or resilience.

Treating war as a regime also reframes debates about responsibility and accountability. If war emerges through cumulative transformations rather than singular decisions, responsibility cannot be localized solely in moments of outbreak. It is distributed across practices, adaptations, and governance choices that reshape political order over time. This challenges two common views at once: the deterministic view that treats war as structurally inevitable, and the voluntarist view that blames it solely on miscalculation.

At the same time, the regime perspective preserves a space for political intervention. If escalation involves the contraction of coordination space, then preserving or restoring adaptive political capacity becomes a meaningful political objective. Interventions aimed at sustaining mediation, protecting informational integrity, and maintaining relational intermediacy may not prevent all violence. However, they can shape whether escalation remains reversible or consolidates into a coercive regime.

5.6. Concluding Reflections

This article has argued that escalation is best understood not as a sequence of events or an intensification of violence, but as a temporal process through which political order is transformed. By conceptualizing war as the emergence of a regime of coercive coordination, the analysis highlights dynamics of capacity loss, self-conditioning, irreversibility, and lock-in that remain under-theorized in dominant approaches to escalation.

By bringing together escalation studies, resilience to violence, civil resistance, anticipation, and path dependence, the article clarifies how political systems may remain functionally ordered while losing the capacities that make non-coercive coordination recoverable. This synthesis also helps specify why interventions that preserve mediation, information integrity, and relational intermediacy matter: they do not merely reduce immediate violence, but help sustain the coordination conditions that prevent escalation from becoming regime transformation.

Understanding war as a regime does not excuse violence, nor does it deny contingency or agency. It does, however, enable a more precise diagnosis of how wars emerge, persist, and resist reversal. By moving beyond the language of breakdown, miscalculation, or surprise, the regime perspective opens space for thinking politically about the conditions under which escalation becomes difficult to reverse, and about the limits of governance strategies that operate within political orders already undergoing transformation.

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