



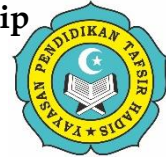
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## Iran War Aftershocks and Reshaping the Regional Order: Assessing the Current State of the Us–Iran War

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The contemporary conflict between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran has evolved into one of the most consequential geopolitical rivalries of the twenty-first century, extending beyond conventional military confrontation to encompass proxy warfare, cyber operations, economic sanctions, maritime security, and nuclear diplomacy. This study examines the multidimensional nature of the US–Iran conflict and evaluates its implications for the evolving regional security order in the Middle East.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study adopts a qualitative research design based on documentary analysis. It integrates the perspectives of Offensive Realism, Balance of Power Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory to analyze the strategic dynamics of the conflict. Data are drawn from scholarly literature, official government publications, think tank reports, policy documents, and reports from international organizations. The analysis employs thematic and comparative methods to examine the military, political, economic, diplomatic, and energy-security dimensions of the rivalry. **Findings** – The findings indicate that the US–Iran confrontation has accelerated the transition from a predominantly US-led regional security architecture toward a more fragmented and multipolar strategic environment. The conflict has intensified proxy competition, encouraged shifting regional alliances, and increased the involvement of external powers in Middle Eastern security affairs. While military deterrence has constrained direct interstate escalation, it has proven insufficient to address the structural drivers of the rivalry. Moreover, the expansion of proxy warfare has heightened risks to maritime security, global energy markets, nuclear non-proliferation, and regional governance, reinforcing geopolitical polarization across the region. **Research implications/limitations** – This study is limited to qualitative documentary analysis and does not incorporate quantitative conflict data or field-based evidence. Future research should employ longitudinal and empirical approaches to assess the long-term effectiveness of diplomatic initiatives, deterrence strategies, and regional security mechanisms. **Originality/value** – This study contributes to contemporary security and Middle Eastern studies by integrating multiple international relations theories to explain the transformation of the US–Iran rivalry within an evolving multipolar regional order. It argues that sustainable regional stability will require an inclusive security framework combining diplomacy, confidence-building measures, multilateral cooperation, and regional institutions capable of addressing both interstate competition and transnational security challenges.

**Keywords:** United States; Iran; Middle East; Regional Order; Proxy Warfare; Offensive Realism; Regional Security; Balance of Power; Geopolitics; Strategic Competition.

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## Introduction

The Middle East has historically occupied a central position within global strategic affairs due to its abundant hydrocarbon resources, geostrategic maritime corridors, religious significance, and enduring geopolitical rivalries. Among the numerous conflicts that have shaped the region's political landscape over the last four decades, none has demonstrated greater strategic significance than the prolonged confrontation between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. What began as a diplomatic rupture following the 1979 Iranian Revolution has evolved into one of the world's most enduring geopolitical rivalries, influencing virtually every major security issue across the Middle East and beyond (Gause, 2021).

Unlike conventional interstate wars characterized by clearly defined battlefields and formal declarations of war, the US-Iran conflict has largely unfolded as a hybrid confrontation involving economic sanctions, proxy warfare, cyber operations, intelligence activities, maritime security disputes, ideological competition, diplomatic isolation, and selective military engagements. This multidimensional character has enabled both states to pursue strategic objectives while avoiding a full-scale conventional war, thereby creating a persistent state of controlled escalation that has become a defining feature of Middle Eastern security dynamics (Byman, 2020).

The strategic rivalry intensified considerably following the United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, the subsequent reimposition of comprehensive economic sanctions, and the assassination of Iranian Major General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020. These developments significantly eroded diplomatic trust between Washington and Tehran while reinforcing mutual perceptions of existential threat (Takeyh, 2020). Iran responded by expanding uranium enrichment activities, strengthening relationships with regional proxy organizations, and intensifying strategic cooperation with Russia and China. Concurrently, the United States strengthened security cooperation with Israel and Gulf Arab states, expanded military deployments across the region, and intensified efforts to constrain Iran's regional influence.

Recent military developments have fundamentally altered the strategic environment. Direct exchanges between Iran and Israel, attacks involving Iranian-backed armed groups, military operations affecting maritime shipping routes in the Red Sea and the Strait of Hormuz, and repeated United States military responses have increased concerns regarding the possibility of broader regional conflict. The confrontation has consequently evolved beyond a bilateral dispute into a complex regional security crisis involving multiple state and non-

state actors whose interests intersect across interconnected theatres of conflict including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Gaza, and the Persian Gulf.

The implications of this evolving conflict extend well beyond the Middle East. The region supplies approximately one-third of globally traded crude oil, while strategic waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz remain essential for international commerce. Consequently, instability generated by the US–Iran confrontation has significant repercussions for global energy markets, inflation, international trade, maritime security, and broader geopolitical competition among major powers. China and Russia have increasingly expanded diplomatic, military, and economic engagement with Iran, while European governments continue to balance concerns regarding nuclear proliferation against broader regional stability. The conflict has therefore become deeply intertwined with emerging patterns of global multipolarity.

From a security studies perspective, the US–Iran rivalry represents a paradigmatic example of contemporary hybrid conflict, illustrating how modern interstate competition increasingly combines conventional military deterrence with irregular warfare, cyber operations, economic coercion, information campaigns, and proxy networks. Such developments challenge traditional understandings of warfare by demonstrating how states pursue strategic objectives through indirect means while avoiding the costs associated with direct military confrontation (Freedman, 2019). Consequently, the conflict provides valuable empirical insights into evolving patterns of twenty-first-century international security.

The regional consequences have been equally transformative. Gulf monarchies have diversified their foreign policy partnerships beyond traditional reliance on the United States. The Abraham Accords initiated unprecedented normalization between Israel and several Arab states, while China has emerged as an increasingly influential diplomatic actor, exemplified by its facilitation of the Saudi Arabia–Iran rapprochement in 2023. Simultaneously, Russia's expanding strategic cooperation with Iran has reinforced Tehran's capacity to resist Western pressure. These developments collectively indicate the gradual emergence of a more fragmented and multipolar regional order characterized by multiple competing centers of influence.

Despite extensive scholarly attention devoted to US–Iran relations, significant gaps remain in understanding how the cumulative effects of recent military escalations are reshaping the broader regional security architecture. Much of the existing literature continues to focus either on Iran's nuclear program, sanctions policy, or individual episodes of military confrontation without adequately integrating these developments into a comprehensive

assessment of the evolving regional order. Furthermore, rapidly changing geopolitical circumstances—including direct Iran-Israel military exchanges, renewed maritime insecurity, intensified proxy warfare, and shifting great-power competition—necessitate updated scholarly analysis capable of capturing the strategic transformations currently underway.

This article addresses these gaps by examining the aftershocks of the current US-Iran conflict and evaluating their implications for regional order in the Middle East. Rather than viewing individual crises as isolated events, the study conceptualizes the conflict as part of a broader process of regional transformation driven by shifting power balances, evolving alliance structures, technological change, and intensified geopolitical competition among regional and global actors.

The study argues that the contemporary US-Iran confrontation represents not merely a bilateral security dispute but a structural catalyst accelerating the transition from a predominantly US-centered regional order toward an increasingly contested multipolar security environment. In this emerging order, traditional alliances coexist with flexible strategic partnerships, proxy organizations continue to shape regional security dynamics, and external powers increasingly compete for political and economic influence. Understanding these transformations is essential for policymakers, scholars, and international organizations seeking to develop sustainable approaches to conflict management and regional stability.

## Historical Context

The origins of hostility between the United States and Iran can be traced to the 1953 coup d'état, when the elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh was overthrown with support from the United States and the United Kingdom after his decision to nationalize Iran's oil industry. The restoration of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi entrenched a close strategic partnership between Tehran and Washington during the Cold War, but it also generated widespread domestic resentment that culminated in the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Kinzer, 2008).

Following the revolution, Iran adopted an anti-Western foreign policy rooted in the principles of revolutionary Islam, resistance to perceived imperialism, and support for what it described as oppressed Muslim communities. The seizure of the US Embassy in Tehran and the ensuing hostage crisis marked the beginning of a prolonged diplomatic rupture that has persisted for more than four decades. Since then, mutual mistrust has shaped virtually every aspect of bilateral relations.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the United States pursued a strategy of containment aimed at limiting Iran's regional influence through economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military partnerships with Gulf Arab states. Iran, in turn, sought to expand its strategic depth by cultivating relationships with non-state actors, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and later various militias operating in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This strategy enabled Tehran to project influence beyond its borders while reducing the risks associated with direct military confrontation.

The attacks of September 11, 2001, initially created limited opportunities for tactical cooperation between the United States and Iran against the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, the subsequent designation of Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil" by President George W. Bush in 2002 rapidly undermined these prospects. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 further transformed the regional balance of power by eliminating Saddam Hussein, Iran's principal regional rival, thereby creating opportunities for expanded Iranian influence in Iraq through political parties and Shi'a militias.

Iran's nuclear program subsequently emerged as the dominant issue in bilateral relations. International concerns regarding uranium enrichment resulted in multiple rounds of sanctions imposed by the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union. These tensions culminated in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), under which Iran accepted significant restrictions on its nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief. Although widely regarded as a major diplomatic achievement, the agreement remained politically contentious both within the United States and Iran.

The unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in 2018 fundamentally altered the strategic landscape. The reimposition of comprehensive sanctions under the "maximum pressure" campaign sought to compel Iran to renegotiate broader issues, including ballistic missile development and regional activities. Rather than producing concessions, however, the policy intensified strategic confrontation and contributed to escalating regional instability.

The contemporary phase of the conflict has witnessed increasing militarization through proxy engagements, maritime confrontations, cyber operations, targeted assassinations, and direct military exchanges involving Iran, Israel, and US forces. These developments underscore the transformation of the US–Iran rivalry into a broader regional security crisis whose consequences extend far beyond bilateral relations.

## Statement of the Problem

The contemporary security environment in the Middle East has become increasingly volatile as a result of the prolonged strategic confrontation between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. While successive administrations in Washington have pursued policies aimed at constraining Iran's regional ambitions, Tehran has simultaneously expanded its strategic influence through military modernization, proxy organizations, asymmetric warfare, and strategic partnerships with emerging global powers. Rather than diminishing tensions, these competing strategies have generated a persistent cycle of escalation that threatens regional stability and international security (Byman, 2020).

Recent developments have intensified these concerns. The collapse of negotiations aimed at restoring the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran's continued advancement of uranium enrichment capabilities, direct military exchanges involving Iran and Israel, repeated attacks by Iranian-aligned armed groups against United States interests in Iraq and Syria, and increasing maritime insecurity in the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea have collectively transformed what was once considered a strategic rivalry into a multidimensional regional security crisis (International Crisis Group, 2025).

The strategic consequences extend well beyond military confrontation. The conflict has disrupted global energy markets, increased insurance costs for international shipping, heightened the risks of nuclear proliferation, and accelerated geopolitical competition among major powers. China's expanding diplomatic engagement, Russia's growing military cooperation with Iran, and the gradual diversification of Gulf Arab foreign policies indicate that the traditional United States-led regional security architecture is undergoing significant transformation (Alterman, 2024).

Despite extensive scholarship on United States–Iran relations, several important gaps remain.

First, much of the literature continues to examine isolated dimensions of the rivalry, including sanctions, nuclear diplomacy, proxy warfare, or regional alliances, without adequately integrating these variables into a comprehensive assessment of the evolving regional order.

Second, earlier studies primarily focused on the implications of the JCPOA or Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, recent developments—including direct military exchanges involving Iran and Israel, intensified attacks by non-state armed groups, cyber warfare, and renewed geopolitical competition among global powers—have fundamentally altered the strategic landscape.

Third, insufficient scholarly attention has been devoted to understanding how the cumulative effects of the current confrontation are restructuring regional power relations, altering alliance formations, and influencing the emergence of a more multipolar Middle Eastern security system.

Furthermore, existing policy debates remain divided regarding whether the present confrontation represents a temporary escalation or the beginning of a long-term restructuring of Middle Eastern geopolitics. This uncertainty complicates strategic planning for regional governments, international organizations, and external powers seeking sustainable approaches to conflict management.

Consequently, there is an urgent need for a comprehensive analytical study capable of assessing the current state of the US–Iran conflict within the broader context of regional transformation. Such an assessment must examine not only military developments but also their political, economic, diplomatic, technological, and strategic implications for the evolving Middle Eastern order.

This study addresses these gaps by providing an integrated analysis of the current US–Iran war and evaluating its implications for regional security, alliance politics, great-power competition, energy security, and the future architecture of Middle Eastern governance.

## **Conceptualizing Regional Order**

Regional order refers to the formal and informal structures, institutions, norms, alliances, and distributions of power that regulate political interactions among states within a particular geographical region (Acharya, 2018). Unlike the broader international order, regional orders are often shaped by localized historical experiences, security concerns, identity politics, and patterns of external intervention.

Buzan and Wæver (2003) argue that regional security systems emerge because security threats travel more rapidly across geographical proximity than across distant regions. Consequently, states within a region become strategically interconnected, making conflicts difficult to isolate.

In the Middle East, regional order has historically been characterized by three defining features.

First is the persistent intervention of external powers, including the United States, Russia, Britain, and increasingly China. Second is the centrality of ideological competition involving Arab nationalism, political Islam, sectarian identities, and state sovereignty. Third is the prevalence of interstate rivalries reinforced by proxy conflicts involving non-state armed actors.

Following the Cold War, the United States emerged as the predominant external guarantor of regional security. American military bases across the Gulf, security partnerships with Israel and GCC states, and extensive naval deployments enabled Washington to maintain strategic dominance for nearly three decades (Gause, 2021). However, recent geopolitical developments suggest that this order is undergoing significant transformation. China's growing economic influence through the Belt and Road Initiative, Russia's military intervention in Syria, and Iran's expanding regional influence have collectively weakened the exclusivity of American regional leadership. The current US-Iran confrontation represents one of the principal catalysts accelerating this transformation.

### **Evolution of United States-Iran Relations**

Modern US-Iran relations have experienced alternating periods of strategic partnership and intense hostility. Prior to 1979, Iran served as one of Washington's closest regional allies. Under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran functioned as a pillar of United States containment strategy against Soviet influence while receiving substantial military and economic assistance (Kinzer, 2008). The Islamic Revolution fundamentally altered this relationship. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini rejected Western political influence and articulated a foreign policy centered upon Islamic governance, anti-imperialism, and support for resistance movements. The seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran in November 1979 symbolized the complete collapse of bilateral relations and established a pattern of mutual hostility that continues today. Throughout the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), the United States largely supported Iraq while simultaneously seeking to contain Iranian revolutionary influence throughout the Gulf. American naval operations during the so-called Tanker War further deepened Iranian perceptions of United States hostility.

Following the Cold War, Washington adopted dual containment policies directed against both Iraq and Iran. Comprehensive sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and concerns regarding Iran's missile and nuclear programs became defining features of bilateral relations. The terrorist attacks of September 11 initially created opportunities for tactical cooperation in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, President George W. Bush's designation of Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil" in 2002 rapidly undermined these possibilities (Takeyh, 2020). The 2003 invasion of Iraq significantly altered regional power balances by removing Saddam Hussein, thereby expanding opportunities for Iranian influence within Iraqi politics and security institutions. Many scholars argue that this development represented one of the most consequential unintended strategic

outcomes of American intervention in the Middle East (Mearsheimer & Walt, 2016).

## **Iran's Regional Strategy**

Iran's contemporary regional strategy rests upon several mutually reinforcing pillars.

The first is strategic deterrence through asymmetric warfare. Recognizing conventional military disadvantages relative to the United States, Iran has invested heavily in ballistic missiles, drones, cyber capabilities, naval asymmetry, and proxy organizations. The second pillar involves establishing what Iranian policymakers frequently describe as the "Axis of Resistance," consisting of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Palestine, various Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Syrian government forces, and the Houthi movement in Yemen (Nasr, 2021). These organizations provide Tehran with strategic depth while complicating adversaries' military calculations.

Third, Iran has increasingly diversified its diplomatic relationships. Long-term strategic agreements with China, expanding military cooperation with Russia, and growing engagement within organizations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation reflect Tehran's broader strategy of reducing dependence on Western political and economic systems. Fourth, economic resilience has become central to Iranian national strategy. Years of sanctions have encouraged domestic industrial development, regional trade diversification, and the expansion of informal financial networks designed to mitigate external economic pressure. Collectively, these strategies have enabled Iran to maintain considerable regional influence despite sustained economic sanctions and international isolation.

## **United States Strategy toward Iran**

Successive American administrations have pursued varying approaches toward Iran, ranging from diplomatic engagement to maximum pressure. Despite tactical differences, the overarching objectives have remained relatively consistent:

- Prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons.
- Limit Iranian regional influence.
- Protect Israel and Gulf allies.
- Ensure freedom of navigation through strategic waterways.
- Maintain regional stability favorable to United States interests.

The Obama administration prioritized diplomacy, culminating in the JCPOA in 2015. Conversely, the Trump administration withdrew from the

agreement and adopted a "maximum pressure" strategy combining economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military deterrence (Maloney, 2020).

The Biden administration initially sought to revive nuclear negotiations but faced significant obstacles arising from mutual distrust, domestic political constraints, and escalating regional conflicts. By 2024–2025, direct military confrontations involving Iran, Israel, and US forces had further complicated diplomatic efforts, shifting policy attention toward crisis management and deterrence rather than comprehensive rapprochement. The persistence of these strategic objectives underscores the structural nature of the US–Iran rivalry, suggesting that changes in political leadership alone are unlikely to resolve the underlying sources of conflict.

### **Proxy Warfare and the Transformation of Contemporary Conflict**

One of the defining characteristics of the United States–Iran confrontation is its reliance on proxy warfare. Unlike conventional interstate wars involving direct military engagements between national armed forces, proxy wars involve external powers supporting non-state actors or allied governments to pursue strategic objectives while minimizing the political, economic, and military costs associated with direct confrontation (Mumford, 2013). Proxy warfare has become a central feature of twenty-first-century conflicts because it enables states to project power, preserve strategic ambiguity, and avoid large-scale conventional warfare.

Iran has institutionalized proxy warfare as a core component of its regional security doctrine. Since the establishment of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its Quds Force, Tehran has invested heavily in developing and sustaining networks of allied armed groups throughout the Middle East. These include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories, several Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, militias supporting the Syrian government, and the Houthi movement in Yemen (Byman, 2020). Through these actors, Iran projects influence across multiple theatres without requiring the deployment of large conventional forces.

Scholars argue that proxy organizations provide Tehran with several strategic advantages. First, they increase Iran's deterrence capabilities by expanding the number of potential fronts against its adversaries. Second, they complicate military planning for the United States and its allies by blurring the distinction between state and non-state actors. Third, they enable Iran to shape political outcomes in neighboring countries while maintaining plausible deniability regarding specific military operations (Phillips, 2021).

The United States has likewise relied on proxy partnerships throughout the Middle East. American support for Israel, Kurdish security forces in Syria and Iraq, and various Gulf partners reflects a broader strategy of burden-sharing and indirect regional engagement. However, unlike Iran's ideologically driven proxy relationships, American partnerships are generally institutionalized through formal military cooperation, defense agreements, and security assistance programs (Brands & Edelman, 2022).

The growing sophistication of proxy warfare has transformed the nature of regional conflict. Armed groups increasingly possess advanced missile systems, precision-guided munitions, armed unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), cyber capabilities, and intelligence assets once reserved for conventional militaries. Consequently, proxy organizations have evolved into strategic actors capable of influencing interstate deterrence dynamics and regional power balances.

The conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen demonstrate how proxy warfare has become deeply intertwined with broader geopolitical competition. Rather than isolated local conflicts, these theatres increasingly function as interconnected arenas within the wider strategic rivalry between Iran, the United States, Israel, and Gulf Arab states. As a result, localized military incidents frequently possess regional and even global implications.

### **Hybrid Warfare and Emerging Security Threats**

The US–Iran confrontation also exemplifies the evolution of hybrid warfare. Hoffman (2007) defines hybrid warfare as the coordinated use of conventional military force, irregular warfare, cyber operations, information campaigns, economic coercion, terrorism, and diplomatic pressure to achieve strategic objectives. Hybrid warfare challenges traditional distinctions between war and peace by creating persistent strategic competition below the threshold of full-scale conventional conflict.

Iran has become particularly adept at integrating multiple instruments of national power. Its military strategy combines ballistic missile development, drone technology, cyber operations, economic resilience, ideological messaging, and proxy warfare into a comprehensive deterrence framework (Cordesman, 2021). Rather than attempting to match American conventional military superiority, Tehran seeks to exploit asymmetric advantages that impose disproportionate costs on its adversaries.

Cyber warfare has emerged as a particularly significant component of this strategy. Both the United States and Iran have engaged in cyber operations targeting critical infrastructure, financial institutions, military systems, and

industrial facilities. Incidents such as the Stuxnet cyberattack against Iranian nuclear facilities and subsequent Iranian cyber campaigns illustrate the growing importance of cyberspace as an arena of strategic competition (Lindsay, 2015).

Similarly, the proliferation of unmanned aerial systems has fundamentally altered regional security dynamics. Iranian-designed drones supplied to allied organizations have demonstrated increasing effectiveness in attacks against military installations, energy infrastructure, and commercial shipping. These capabilities provide relatively inexpensive yet strategically significant alternatives to conventional air power.

Information warfare constitutes another important dimension of hybrid conflict. Both Washington and Tehran employ media campaigns, strategic communications, and digital platforms to shape international perceptions, mobilize domestic support, and influence regional public opinion. Consequently, contemporary conflict increasingly extends beyond physical battlefields into cognitive and informational domains.

## **Nuclear Politics and Strategic Deterrence**

Iran's nuclear program remains one of the most contentious issues in international security. Since the early 2000s, concerns regarding uranium enrichment, nuclear transparency, and potential weapons development have dominated diplomatic relations between Tehran and Western governments. While Iran consistently maintains that its nuclear program serves exclusively peaceful purposes, many governments view its expanding enrichment capabilities as a potential pathway toward nuclear weapons capability (International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA], 2024).

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), concluded in 2015, represented the most comprehensive diplomatic effort to address these concerns. The agreement imposed significant limitations on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief and enhanced international monitoring. Supporters argued that the JCPOA substantially delayed Iran's potential acquisition of nuclear weapons while establishing an unprecedented verification regime (Fitzpatrick, 2018).

However, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the agreement in 2018 fundamentally altered the strategic environment. The reimposition of sanctions prompted Iran to gradually reduce compliance with several JCPOA provisions, including limitations on uranium enrichment levels, stockpile size, and advanced centrifuge deployment.

The collapse of negotiations to restore the agreement has intensified uncertainty regarding future nuclear developments. Some scholars contend that

Iran increasingly seeks a threshold nuclear capability rather than immediate weaponization, thereby maximizing deterrence while minimizing the political costs associated with formally becoming a nuclear-armed state (Vaez, 2023). Others argue that prolonged diplomatic failure increases the likelihood of preventive military action by Israel or the United States.

Nuclear deterrence theory provides important insights into these dynamics. According to Waltz (1981), nuclear weapons may contribute to strategic stability by increasing the costs of interstate war. Conversely, Sagan (1994) argues that nuclear proliferation introduces significant risks arising from organizational failures, misperception, and accidental escalation. The contemporary US–Iran confrontation reflects this debate, as policymakers struggle to balance deterrence, diplomacy, and non-proliferation objectives.

### **Israel–Iran Strategic Rivalry**

The strategic rivalry between Israel and Iran constitutes one of the principal drivers of regional instability. Although the two countries maintained cooperative relations prior to the 1979 Iranian Revolution, ideological transformation within Iran fundamentally altered bilateral relations. Successive Iranian governments have opposed Israel's regional policies and supported Palestinian resistance organizations, while Israel has consistently viewed Iran's nuclear program and regional influence as existential security threats.

This rivalry increasingly intersects with United States policy. American security commitments to Israel significantly influence Washington's broader approach toward Iran, while Israeli intelligence operations and military planning shape regional deterrence dynamics (Inbar, 2022).

The emergence of the Abraham Accords further altered regional alignments by facilitating normalization between Israel and several Arab states. These agreements reflected shared concerns regarding Iranian regional influence while simultaneously expanding opportunities for security cooperation involving intelligence sharing, missile defense, and technological collaboration.

More recently, direct military exchanges between Israel and Iran have challenged previous patterns of indirect confrontation. Missile strikes, drone attacks, and retaliatory operations have increased concerns regarding uncontrolled escalation capable of drawing additional regional and international actors into wider conflict.

## **External Powers and the Emerging Multipolar Middle East**

The strategic landscape of the Middle East is increasingly shaped by the growing involvement of external powers beyond the United States. China and Russia have expanded their political, economic, and military engagement throughout the region, contributing to the gradual emergence of a more multipolar regional order.

China's interests are primarily economic. As the world's largest importer of crude oil, Beijing seeks stability in Gulf energy markets while simultaneously expanding infrastructure investment through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Unlike the United States, China generally emphasizes non-interference and economic cooperation, enabling it to maintain productive relations with both Iran and Gulf Arab states (Rolland, 2022).

China's facilitation of the 2023 diplomatic rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran demonstrated its growing capacity to influence regional diplomacy. This development challenged longstanding assumptions regarding exclusive American leadership in Middle Eastern security affairs and highlighted the increasing diversification of regional partnerships.

Russia's engagement differs considerably. Military intervention in Syria preserved the Assad government while establishing Moscow as a major strategic actor in the Levant. Cooperation with Iran has expanded in areas including defense technology, energy, intelligence, and diplomatic coordination. The strengthening of Russia–Iran relations has significant implications for the regional balance of power, particularly in the context of broader geopolitical competition with the United States and NATO.

These developments suggest that the Middle East is transitioning toward a more complex geopolitical environment in which regional actors increasingly pursue multidirectional foreign policies rather than exclusive alignment with any single external power.

## **Energy Security and Maritime Geopolitics**

Energy security remains central to understanding the strategic significance of the US–Iran confrontation. The Persian Gulf contains approximately half of the world's proven oil reserves and a substantial proportion of global natural gas resources (BP, 2023). Consequently, instability within the region has immediate consequences for international energy markets.

The Strait of Hormuz represents one of the world's most strategically significant maritime chokepoints. Approximately one-fifth of globally traded petroleum passes through this narrow waterway each day (U.S. Energy

Information Administration, 2024). Iranian threats to restrict navigation during periods of heightened tension therefore possess substantial geopolitical and economic implications.

Similarly, the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb Strait have become increasingly vulnerable to disruptions associated with regional conflicts. Attacks on commercial shipping by Iranian-aligned groups have increased transportation costs, insurance premiums, and supply-chain uncertainty, demonstrating how localized conflicts can generate global economic consequences.

Energy infrastructure itself has become an increasingly attractive strategic target. Drone and missile attacks against oil production facilities illustrate how relatively inexpensive technologies can produce significant disruptions in international markets. Such developments underscore the growing interdependence between regional security and global economic stability.

### **Empirical Research Gap**

Despite the extensive body of literature examining United States–Iran relations, several important empirical and theoretical gaps remain.

First, existing scholarship often compartmentalizes the conflict into distinct analytical categories—such as sanctions, nuclear diplomacy, proxy warfare, or maritime security—without sufficiently examining their cumulative effects on the broader regional order. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how these interconnected dynamics collectively reshape Middle Eastern geopolitics. Second, much of the literature predates the most recent phase of regional escalation, including direct military exchanges involving Iran and Israel, intensified maritime insecurity, the expansion of drone warfare, and increasing strategic cooperation among Iran, Russia, and China. These developments necessitate updated scholarly analysis.

Third, insufficient attention has been devoted to examining how regional actors themselves—including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Türkiye, and Iraq—are adapting their foreign policies within the context of an increasingly multipolar regional environment. Finally, relatively few studies integrate multiple theoretical perspectives capable of explaining the interaction between interstate competition, proxy warfare, and regional security transformation. This article addresses these gaps by employing Offensive Realism, Balance of Power Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory within a unified analytical framework.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Offensive Realism**

This study adopts Offensive Realism, as developed by John J. Mearsheimer (2001), as one of its principal theoretical lenses. Offensive Realism argues that the anarchic nature of the international system compels states to maximize their relative power in order to ensure survival. Because no higher authority can guarantee security, states continuously seek opportunities to enhance their strategic position.

From this perspective, both the United States and Iran behave as rational actors responding to structural insecurity. The United States seeks to preserve its regional primacy by maintaining alliances, deterring adversaries, and preventing the emergence of hostile regional hegemons. Iran, facing overwhelming conventional military superiority, pursues asymmetric capabilities, strategic depth through proxy organizations, and diversified external partnerships to enhance its security and influence. Offensive Realism explains why periods of diplomacy have repeatedly failed to eliminate strategic competition. Even when agreements such as the JCPOA temporarily reduced tensions, underlying concerns regarding relative power and long-term intentions remained unresolved. The theory therefore predicts that strategic rivalry will persist unless significant changes occur in the regional distribution of power or mutual threat perceptions.

### **Balance of Power Theory**

Balance of Power Theory is among the foundational approaches in international relations for explaining interstate competition and alliance formation. Classical theorists such as Morgenthau (1948) and later structural realists including Waltz (1979) argue that states seek to prevent any single actor from attaining overwhelming dominance within the international system. Because the international environment is anarchic and lacks a central authority, states pursue military capabilities, diplomatic alliances, and strategic partnerships to preserve equilibrium and ensure survival.

Stephen Walt's (1987) refinement of the theory through the Balance of Threat concept provides particular relevance to the US–Iran rivalry. Walt argues that states do not balance against power alone but against perceived threats, which are determined by aggregate capabilities, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions. This distinction helps explain why several Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have strengthened security cooperation with the United States and Israel despite maintaining significant economic interactions with Iran.

The evolving Middle Eastern security environment illustrates multiple balancing behaviors. Israel has enhanced missile defense cooperation with the United States while expanding strategic partnerships with several Arab states through the Abraham Accords. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates continue to rely on American security guarantees while simultaneously pursuing diplomatic engagement with Iran and expanding economic cooperation with China. Iran has responded by strengthening strategic relationships with Russia and China, expanding indigenous defense capabilities, and reinforcing its network of regional allies.

Balance of Power Theory also explains the emergence of flexible rather than rigid alliance structures. Rather than exclusive alignment with a single great power, many regional states increasingly pursue diversified partnerships designed to maximize strategic autonomy. This phenomenon reflects what scholars describe as "multi-alignment" or "strategic hedging," whereby states maintain cooperative relationships with multiple major powers simultaneously (Kuik, 2021).

Within the context of this study, Balance of Power Theory explains how the US-Iran confrontation has accelerated alliance restructuring throughout the Middle East. Rather than producing bipolar alignment, the conflict has contributed to a more complex regional order characterized by overlapping security partnerships, economic interdependence, and issue-specific cooperation among states with divergent strategic interests.

### **Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT)**

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), developed by Buzan and Wæver (2003), provides the principal analytical framework for understanding how security interactions become geographically concentrated within particular regions. According to RSCT, states located within the same geographical area are more likely to influence one another's security than distant actors because threats travel more rapidly across geographical proximity.

The Middle East represents one of the world's most interconnected regional security complexes. Political instability in one country frequently produces spillover effects throughout neighboring states via refugee flows, transnational armed groups, energy disruptions, sectarian mobilization, and external military intervention. Consequently, security cannot be understood solely at the national level but must instead be analyzed as part of a broader regional system.

The US-Iran confrontation exemplifies this dynamic. Military incidents involving Iranian-backed groups in Iraq influence American force posture

throughout the region. Israeli military operations affect Lebanese and Syrian security environments. Maritime incidents in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea disrupt global trade and energy markets. These interconnected developments illustrate how localized conflicts generate regional and international consequences.

RSCT also highlights the significance of external powers. Although the United States, Russia, and China are not geographically part of the Middle East, their military presence, diplomatic engagement, and economic interests significantly influence regional security dynamics. External intervention therefore reinforces rather than replaces indigenous regional rivalries.

The theory further emphasizes that regional security complexes evolve over time. Changes in military technology, alliance structures, domestic political transformations, and external power competition continuously reshape patterns of regional interaction. Recent developments—including the Saudi-Iran rapprochement, expanding Chinese diplomacy, strengthened Russia-Iran cooperation, and normalization agreements involving Israel—suggest that the Middle Eastern security complex is undergoing substantial transformation.

Within this study, RSCT provides the overarching framework for understanding how the cumulative aftershocks of the US-Iran conflict are restructuring regional security relationships beyond the immediate bilateral confrontation.

## **Integration of Theoretical Perspectives**

Each theoretical perspective illuminates a distinct dimension of the US-Iran conflict:

- Offensive Realism explains the structural motivations driving both states to maximize relative power and pursue strategic advantages in an anarchic international system.
- Balance of Power Theory accounts for the evolving alliance structures and balancing behaviors adopted by regional and external actors.
- Regional Security Complex Theory demonstrates how the conflict extends beyond bilateral relations to reshape broader regional security dynamics.

By integrating these complementary perspectives, the study develops a multidimensional analytical framework capable of explaining both the persistence of the conflict and its transformative effects on Middle Eastern regional order.

## Method

This study adopts a qualitative research design. Qualitative methods are particularly appropriate for examining complex geopolitical phenomena because they enable in-depth analysis of political processes, strategic interactions, and historical developments that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative indicators alone (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study employs an explanatory and interpretive approach, focusing on understanding how the US–Iran conflict has evolved and how its cumulative effects are reshaping regional security structures.

## Analysis and Discussion

### Evolution of the Current US–Iran War

Unlike conventional interstate wars characterized by formal declarations of hostilities, the contemporary US–Iran conflict has evolved through successive phases of strategic escalation spanning more than four decades. The present confrontation represents the culmination of long-standing political, ideological, military, and economic rivalries rather than a singular event. The post-2018 period marked a decisive turning point. Following the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA and the implementation of the "maximum pressure" campaign, Iran increasingly relied upon asymmetric strategies to counter American economic and military superiority. Economic sanctions significantly constrained Iranian oil exports and access to international financial systems, yet they did not fundamentally alter Tehran's regional policies. Instead, Iran expanded uranium enrichment activities, accelerated missile development, and deepened cooperation with regional partners.

The targeted killing of Major General Qassem Soleimani in January 2020 further intensified strategic competition. Soleimani had served as the principal architect of Iran's regional military strategy and maintained extensive relationships with allied organizations throughout Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. His death prompted retaliatory missile strikes against US military facilities in Iraq and reinforced Iranian commitments to asymmetric deterrence. Since then, the conflict has increasingly involved indirect military engagements rather than sustained conventional combat. Iranian-backed groups have conducted attacks against US military personnel and facilities in Iraq and Syria, while the United States has responded through precision airstrikes targeting militia infrastructure. These exchanges illustrate the persistent but carefully calibrated nature of the confrontation. Simultaneously, maritime tensions have intensified. Incidents involving commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, and Red Sea have demonstrated the strategic vulnerability of global

maritime trade routes. These disruptions have extended the consequences of the conflict beyond regional actors to affect global supply chains, energy markets, and international commerce. The growing use of drones, precision-guided missiles, cyber operations, and space-based intelligence has further transformed the operational environment. Modern technologies enable relatively limited military engagements to generate strategic effects disproportionate to their scale. Consequently, the current conflict increasingly resembles a prolonged hybrid confrontation characterized by persistent competition across multiple domains rather than episodic conventional warfare.

### **Strategic Drivers of the Conflict**

The persistence of the US–Iran confrontation can be explained through several mutually reinforcing strategic drivers.

### **Ideological Competition**

Ideological differences continue to shape bilateral relations. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iran has defined itself partly in opposition to perceived Western domination and has promoted a foreign policy emphasizing resistance, sovereignty, and support for anti-Israeli and anti-American movements. Conversely, successive US administrations have viewed Iran as a principal challenger to the existing regional order. These competing ideological narratives reinforce mutual distrust and complicate diplomatic engagement.

### **Regional Hegemony**

A second driver concerns competition for regional influence. Iran seeks recognition as a major regional power capable of shaping political developments throughout the Middle East. The United States, meanwhile, seeks to preserve a favorable balance of power by supporting allies including Israel and the Gulf monarchies. This competition extends across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories, where political developments frequently influence broader strategic calculations.

### **Security Dilemma**

The conflict also reflects the classic security dilemma. Defensive measures adopted by one side are often interpreted as offensive preparations by the other. American military deployments intended to reassure allies reinforce Iranian perceptions of encirclement. Iranian missile development intended to strengthen deterrence is viewed by Washington and its partners as evidence of aggressive intentions. The resulting cycle of action and reaction contributes to persistent strategic instability.

## **Nuclear Deterrence**

Iran's expanding nuclear capabilities continue to influence regional security calculations. Even absent a declared nuclear weapons program, the accumulation of technical expertise and enrichment capacity affects deterrence dynamics by increasing uncertainty regarding future strategic intentions.

## **Economic Coercion**

Economic sanctions constitute another major driver of the conflict. While intended to compel behavioral change, prolonged sanctions have instead encouraged domestic adaptation, economic diversification, and stronger strategic partnerships with non-Western powers. Rather than eliminating competition, economic pressure has become integrated into the broader strategic rivalry.

## **Proxy Warfare and the "Axis of Resistance": The Operational Core of Iran's Regional Strategy**

One of the defining characteristics of the current US–Iran conflict is the centrality of proxy warfare as an instrument of statecraft. Unlike conventional interstate wars that rely primarily on direct military engagement, proxy warfare enables states to project influence through allied non-state actors while minimizing the political and military costs associated with direct confrontation (Mumford, 2013). For Iran, this strategy has become the cornerstone of its regional security doctrine and a critical mechanism for counterbalancing American conventional military superiority.

The concept of the "Axis of Resistance" refers to the network of state and non-state actors aligned with Iran across the Middle East. Although varying in organizational structure, political objectives, and military capabilities, these groups share broad strategic interests that include resisting Israeli military dominance, opposing sustained American military presence in the region, and expanding Iranian geopolitical influence (Nasr, 2021). Among the most prominent components of this network are Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, various Syrian militia formations supporting the Assad government, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Palestinian territories, and the Houthi movement (Ansar Allah) in Yemen.

These organizations perform several strategic functions for Tehran. First, they provide strategic depth by extending Iran's deterrence perimeter beyond its national borders. Second, they enable Tehran to maintain pressure on regional adversaries through multiple operational theatres simultaneously. Third, they complicate military planning for the United States and Israel by creating the

possibility of multi-front escalation in the event of direct conflict. From the perspective of Offensive Realism, proxy organizations function as force multipliers that enable relatively weaker states to maximize their strategic influence under conditions of military asymmetry (Mearsheimer, 2001). Rather than attempting to compete directly with the overwhelming conventional capabilities of the United States, Iran has developed an asymmetric deterrence architecture capable of imposing significant costs upon its adversaries.

The conflicts in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Gaza, and Yemen demonstrate that these organizations increasingly operate as interconnected components of a broader regional security network. Military developments in one theatre frequently generate strategic consequences in others. For example, Israeli military operations in Gaza often increase tensions along the Lebanese border while simultaneously influencing attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea. This interdependence reinforces Regional Security Complex Theory, which argues that geographically proximate security challenges become mutually reinforcing (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

The United States has responded through a combination of military deterrence, sanctions, intelligence cooperation, and security assistance to regional allies. American forces have conducted targeted strikes against militia infrastructure in Iraq and Syria while simultaneously enhancing missile defense cooperation with Israel and Gulf partners. However, these measures have generally reduced immediate operational threats rather than eliminating the structural conditions sustaining proxy competition. Consequently, proxy warfare has evolved into the principal mechanism through which the US-Iran rivalry is operationalized across the Middle East. It enables sustained strategic competition while preserving a degree of ambiguity that reduces, but does not eliminate, the risk of large-scale interstate war.

### **Military Dimension of the Current Conflict**

The military dimension of the contemporary US-Iran confrontation differs fundamentally from traditional interstate warfare. Instead of sustained conventional campaigns involving mass troop deployments, the conflict is characterized by calibrated military engagements, precision strikes, cyber operations, intelligence activities, maritime confrontations, and technological competition.

## Conventional Military Balance

The United States retains overwhelming superiority in conventional military capabilities. Its extensive network of military bases across Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, and the broader Gulf region provides significant force projection capabilities. Advanced airpower, naval assets, missile defense systems, and intelligence networks enable Washington to maintain rapid operational response throughout the Middle East. Iran, by contrast, possesses comparatively limited conventional capabilities but compensates through asymmetric military doctrine. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has invested heavily in ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, drones, naval swarming tactics, cyber capabilities, and electronic warfare systems (Cordesman, 2021). This approach reflects an understanding that conventional parity with the United States is unattainable; therefore, deterrence must rely upon imposing unacceptable costs rather than achieving battlefield superiority.

## Missile and Drone Warfare

Ballistic missiles and armed drones have become central instruments of Iranian military strategy. The growing precision, range, and survivability of these systems significantly enhance Tehran's deterrence posture. Moreover, the transfer of drone technology to allied organizations has altered the regional balance of military capabilities by enabling relatively small armed groups to conduct increasingly sophisticated operations against strategic targets. Attacks on energy infrastructure, military installations, and commercial shipping demonstrate the strategic utility of these technologies. Compared with traditional air power, drones are relatively inexpensive, difficult to intercept, and capable of generating disproportionate economic and political effects.

## Maritime Security

The Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz remain among the world's most strategically significant maritime corridors. Approximately one-fifth of globally traded crude oil transits the Strait of Hormuz, making uninterrupted navigation essential for international energy security (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2024). Iran has repeatedly demonstrated its capacity to disrupt maritime traffic through naval patrols, fast attack craft, mines, drones, and missile deployments. Although Tehran generally avoids prolonged disruption that might provoke overwhelming military retaliation, periodic incidents underscore its ability to influence global energy markets. Similarly, attacks on commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea have highlighted the strategic vulnerability of alternative maritime routes. Increased insurance premiums,

shipping delays, and rerouted commercial traffic have generated significant economic consequences extending far beyond the Middle East.

## **Cyber Operations**

Cyber warfare constitutes another increasingly important domain of military competition. Both the United States and Iran have invested substantially in offensive and defensive cyber capabilities. Critical infrastructure, financial systems, industrial facilities, and military networks have become frequent targets of cyber operations. Unlike conventional military attacks, cyber operations permit strategic signaling while reducing the likelihood of immediate escalation. However, they also increase uncertainty because attribution remains technically and politically challenging. Collectively, these developments demonstrate that the military dimension of the US–Iran conflict increasingly encompasses multiple operational domains—land, sea, air, cyberspace, and the electromagnetic spectrum—reflecting broader trends in contemporary warfare.

## **Economic Consequences of the Conflict**

Economic competition has become one of the most enduring dimensions of the US–Iran rivalry. Since the reimposition of comprehensive sanctions in 2018, Iran has faced significant restrictions on oil exports, international banking access, foreign investment, and technological imports. These measures were designed to reduce government revenues and compel changes in Iranian regional and nuclear policies (Maloney, 2020). While sanctions have contributed to inflation, currency depreciation, reduced foreign direct investment, and declining household purchasing power within Iran, they have not achieved their broader strategic objectives. Instead, Tehran has adapted through economic diversification, increased regional trade, expanded informal financial networks, and deeper economic engagement with China and Russia.

The broader regional economy has likewise experienced significant disruptions. Periodic escalation has increased energy price volatility, discouraged foreign investment in high-risk areas, and heightened uncertainty within international financial markets. Shipping companies operating in the Persian Gulf and Red Sea have incurred higher insurance costs, while global supply chains have faced delays resulting from maritime insecurity. For Gulf Cooperation Council states, the conflict presents a paradox. Elevated oil prices may temporarily increase government revenues, yet prolonged instability discourages long-term economic diversification and foreign investment. Consequently, regional governments increasingly prioritize diplomatic initiatives designed to reduce tensions while simultaneously strengthening national defense capabilities.

## **Energy Security and Global Economic Stability**

Energy security represents one of the most significant global consequences of the US–Iran confrontation. The Middle East remains indispensable to international energy markets, supplying a substantial proportion of globally traded oil and liquefied natural gas. Disruptions affecting the Strait of Hormuz or major regional production facilities generate immediate repercussions for global commodity prices, inflation, transportation costs, and industrial production. Even limited military incidents frequently trigger speculative market reactions due to concerns regarding potential escalation.

The conflict has also accelerated efforts toward energy diversification. European governments have sought alternative suppliers following disruptions associated with broader geopolitical instability, while Asian economies increasingly pursue long-term energy partnerships that reduce dependence upon vulnerable maritime routes. From a geopolitical perspective, energy security has become inseparable from national security. Protection of pipelines, offshore platforms, refineries, and maritime infrastructure now constitutes an integral component of regional defense planning.

## **China and Russia: Strategic Beneficiaries of Regional Transformation**

The evolving US–Iran conflict has created significant opportunities for China and Russia to expand their regional influence.

China has pursued a strategy emphasizing economic engagement, infrastructure investment, and diplomatic mediation. Its long-term comprehensive strategic partnership with Iran complements extensive economic relationships with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states. This balanced approach enables Beijing to maintain constructive relations across competing regional blocs while safeguarding energy imports essential to its economic development. Russia's strategy is more explicitly security-oriented. Military cooperation with Iran has expanded considerably through defense technology, intelligence sharing, and coordination regarding regional conflicts. Moscow's intervention in Syria reinforced its status as a principal regional security actor while demonstrating its willingness to challenge Western influence. The growing engagement of both powers reflects the gradual transition toward a more multipolar Middle Eastern order in which regional states increasingly diversify strategic partnerships rather than relying exclusively upon the United States.

## Reshaping the Middle Eastern Regional Order

The cumulative effects of the United States–Iran confrontation have significantly altered the strategic architecture of the Middle East. Whereas the post-Cold War regional order was largely characterized by overwhelming American military predominance and relatively stable alliance structures, the contemporary regional environment is increasingly multipolar, fragmented, and strategically fluid.

One of the most significant developments is the diversification of regional partnerships. Traditionally, many Gulf Arab states relied almost exclusively on the United States as their principal security guarantor. While these security relationships remain important, countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Türkiye increasingly pursue multidirectional foreign policies that simultaneously engage the United States, China, Russia, India, and regional actors. This strategic hedging reflects growing uncertainty regarding the long-term reliability of external security guarantees and the recognition that economic and political interests increasingly require engagement with multiple global powers (Kuik, 2021).

The normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states have also transformed regional diplomacy. The Abraham Accords reshaped political alignments by creating new avenues for security cooperation in areas such as intelligence sharing, missile defense, cybersecurity, and technological innovation. While these agreements were motivated by a variety of political and economic considerations, shared concerns regarding Iranian regional influence served as a significant catalyst (Inbar, 2022). At the same time, the 2023 China-brokered rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran demonstrated that regional rivals increasingly recognize the costs of prolonged confrontation and the potential benefits of managed competition.

Another important transformation concerns the growing role of middle powers in regional diplomacy. States such as Qatar, Oman, and Türkiye have expanded their roles as mediators, facilitators, and diplomatic intermediaries. These countries increasingly leverage balanced relationships with competing actors to promote dialogue and reduce tensions. Their emergence reflects a broader decentralization of regional diplomacy, in which conflict management is no longer exclusively dependent upon major external powers.

The conflict has also accelerated the militarization of regional security. Defense expenditures across the Middle East remain among the highest in the world, with governments investing heavily in missile defense systems, cyber capabilities, unmanned aerial vehicles, artificial intelligence, and space-based

surveillance. This technological transformation reflects the evolving character of warfare and the perceived necessity of preparing for multidomain conflict.

The cumulative effect of these developments suggests that the Middle East is transitioning from a predominantly US-led security architecture toward a more competitive regional order characterized by multiple centers of influence, overlapping alliance structures, and intensified strategic competition. Regional Security Complex Theory provides a useful framework for understanding these dynamics, as it emphasizes the interconnected nature of security interactions among geographically proximate states (Buzan & Wæver, 2003).

### **Implications for Africa and the Global South**

Although the US-Iran conflict is centered in the Middle East, its consequences extend far beyond the region, with significant implications for Africa and the broader Global South.

The most immediate impact concerns energy markets. Many African economies remain heavily dependent on imported petroleum products. Consequently, disruptions in Middle Eastern oil production or maritime transport increase fuel prices, transportation costs, inflationary pressures, and fiscal burdens. These economic effects are particularly pronounced in energy-importing African countries where government subsidies often absorb fluctuations in international prices.

Maritime security also presents important concerns. The Red Sea serves as one of Africa's principal commercial gateways, connecting East African ports with Europe and Asia through the Suez Canal. Increased insecurity in the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb Strait disrupts shipping schedules, increases insurance premiums, and raises the overall cost of international trade. Such disruptions affect agricultural exports, manufactured goods, humanitarian supplies, and strategic imports across the continent.

From a geopolitical perspective, the conflict illustrates broader trends associated with the emergence of multipolarity. African governments increasingly engage simultaneously with the United States, China, Russia, the European Union, Gulf states, and other partners rather than aligning exclusively with a single power bloc. This diversification of external partnerships reflects strategic pragmatism similar to that observed among Middle Eastern states.

The conflict also underscores the growing importance of asymmetric warfare, cyber security, and unmanned technologies within contemporary security environments. African defense institutions increasingly confront comparable challenges involving non-state armed groups, transnational terrorism, organized crime, and cyber threats. Consequently, lessons derived

from the US–Iran confrontation may inform broader discussions regarding defense modernization, intelligence cooperation, and regional security governance across Africa.

## **Future Scenarios for the US–Iran Conflict**

Several plausible trajectories may shape the future evolution of the US–Iran rivalry.

### **Scenario One: Prolonged Strategic Competition**

The most likely scenario involves the continuation of controlled strategic competition characterized by proxy warfare, cyber operations, economic sanctions, and periodic military exchanges below the threshold of full-scale war. This outcome reflects the current equilibrium in which both parties seek to avoid catastrophic escalation while maintaining pressure on one another. Offensive Realism suggests that this pattern is likely to persist because neither actor can fully eliminate the other's capabilities without incurring unacceptable costs (Mearsheimer, 2001).

### **Scenario Two: Diplomatic Re-engagement**

A second scenario involves renewed diplomatic engagement. Under this outcome, negotiations could produce limited agreements addressing nuclear activities, maritime security, humanitarian concerns, and regional confidence-building measures. Although comprehensive normalization remains unlikely in the short term, incremental diplomacy could reduce the probability of unintended escalation. Success would require sustained political commitment, reciprocal confidence-building, and support from regional stakeholders.

### **Scenario Three: Regional Escalation**

A third scenario involves a broader regional conflict triggered by miscalculation, accidental escalation, or major attacks against critical infrastructure or military personnel. Given the extensive network of state and non-state actors involved, localized incidents possess the potential to generate cascading regional consequences. Such escalation would likely disrupt global energy markets, threaten international maritime trade, and intensify humanitarian crises.

### **Scenario Four: Emergence of a New Regional Security Architecture**

A more optimistic long-term scenario envisions the gradual development of an inclusive regional security framework incorporating Gulf Arab states, Iran, Iraq, Türkiye, and external stakeholders. Similar to confidence-building mechanisms developed in other regions, such an architecture could address

maritime security, arms control, crisis communication, environmental cooperation, and economic integration. While political obstacles remain substantial, the increasing costs of sustained confrontation may gradually encourage more institutionalized regional cooperation.

## Major Findings

The study generated several important findings.

First, the current US–Iran confrontation is best understood not as a conventional interstate war but as a multidimensional hybrid conflict involving military deterrence, proxy warfare, cyber operations, economic coercion, diplomatic competition, and technological rivalry.

Second, the conflict has significantly accelerated the transformation of the Middle Eastern regional order. Traditional alliance structures are increasingly supplemented by flexible strategic partnerships and diversified diplomatic engagement.

Third, proxy organizations remain central to Iran's regional strategy and constitute one of the principal mechanisms through which the conflict is sustained. These organizations extend the geographical scope of the confrontation while increasing the complexity of regional security dynamics.

Fourth, external powers – particularly China and Russia – have expanded their regional influence, contributing to the emergence of a more multipolar strategic environment.

Fifth, the conflict has substantial global implications extending beyond the Middle East, including disruptions to energy markets, maritime commerce, international trade, and global economic stability.

Finally, the integration of Offensive Realism, Balance of Power Theory, and Regional Security Complex Theory provides a robust analytical framework for explaining both the persistence of the conflict and its transformative effects on regional security architecture.

## Conclusion

The United States–Iran confrontation has become one of the defining geopolitical rivalries of the contemporary international system. Unlike conventional interstate wars, the conflict has evolved into a prolonged hybrid struggle encompassing military, political, economic, technological, ideological, and diplomatic dimensions. This multidimensional character enables sustained competition while simultaneously increasing the risks of miscalculation and regional escalation. The study demonstrates that the conflict extends beyond

bilateral relations and functions as a principal driver of regional transformation. Alliance structures are evolving, new diplomatic actors are emerging, technological innovation is reshaping military strategy, and external powers are increasingly competing for influence throughout the Middle East. These developments collectively indicate the gradual emergence of a more fragmented and multipolar regional order.

Although military deterrence remains an important component of regional security, the findings suggest that deterrence alone cannot address the structural drivers of the conflict. Sustainable stability will require broader political engagement, confidence-building measures, regional dialogue, and institutional mechanisms capable of managing interstate competition while addressing transnational security challenges. Ultimately, the future of the Middle East will depend not only upon the choices of Washington and Tehran but also upon the ability of regional actors to construct a more inclusive and resilient security architecture capable of balancing competition with cooperation.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Revitalize Regional Diplomacy:** Regional governments should establish a permanent multilateral security dialogue involving Iran, Iraq, the Gulf Cooperation Council, Türkiye, Jordan, and other relevant stakeholders to address maritime security, crisis management, and confidence-building.
2. **Strengthen Nuclear Diplomacy:** International efforts should prioritize pragmatic arms-control arrangements, enhanced verification mechanisms, and phased confidence-building measures to reduce nuclear risks.
3. **Develop Regional Crisis Communication Mechanisms:** Direct military communication channels between major regional actors should be institutionalized to reduce the likelihood of accidental escalation.
4. **Address Proxy Conflicts Through Political Settlements:** Durable solutions in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen require inclusive political processes alongside security measures to reduce the influence of armed non-state actors.
5. **Enhance Maritime Security Cooperation:** Regional and international stakeholders should strengthen coordinated patrols, intelligence sharing, and legal frameworks to protect freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Red Sea.

6. Promote Economic Interdependence: Expanding regional trade, infrastructure connectivity, and energy cooperation may create incentives for political moderation and conflict reduction.
7. Support Emerging Middle Powers as Mediators: Countries such as Oman, Qatar, and Türkiye should continue facilitating dialogue between competing regional actors.
8. Invest in Cybersecurity and Critical Infrastructure Protection: Governments should strengthen resilience against cyber threats targeting energy systems, financial institutions, transportation networks, and communication infrastructure.
9. Encourage African and Global South Engagement: African regional organizations should monitor developments in the Middle East and strengthen contingency planning for energy security, maritime trade, and economic resilience.
10. Advance Comprehensive Regional Security Architecture: Long-term stability will require institutionalized security cooperation that integrates military, political, economic, environmental, and humanitarian dimensions of regional governance.

### Author Contributions

**Mukhtar Imam:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Joseph O. Odama:** Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Francis C. Okpo:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing – review & editing, Investigation.

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