



THE CONFIGURATION OF POWER IN THE MIDDLE EAST FOLLOWING THE ISRAEL-IRAN TENSION: A GEOPOLITICAL

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the profound geopolitical shifts in the Middle East following the intensification of tensions between Israel and Iran. It highlights a significant realignment of regional alliances, as several Arab states, particularly in the Gulf, have moved beyond longstanding ideological divides to establish formal diplomatic and security cooperation with Israel, driven largely by shared concerns over Iran's regional ambitions. The research also underscores Iran's strategic reliance on asymmetric warfare and proxy forces, such as Hezbollah, Shia militias in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and its entrenched presence in Syria, to project power indirectly while avoiding direct military confrontation. Furthermore, the study reveals the increasing centrality of non-state actors in shaping regional security dynamics, blurring the traditional state-centric framework and complicating conflict resolution efforts. The evolving roles of global powers—namely the United States, Russia, and China—are analyzed, showing how their distinct policies and competing interests contribute to a complex, multipolar environment in the Middle East. Finally, the findings suggest a decline in traditional sectarian and ethnic divisions as primary determinants of foreign policy, replaced by pragmatic considerations including national interests, regime survival, and economic modernization. In conclusion, the Israel-Iran rivalry has acted as a catalyst for a broader transformation of Middle Eastern geopolitics, resulting in a more fluid and decentralized regional order. While this shift opens new avenues for diplomacy and cooperation, it also heightens unpredictability and demands continuous strategic recalibration by both regional and global actors.

INTRODUCTION

The Middle East remains one of the most dynamic and volatile geopolitical arenas in the contemporary international system. Historically shaped by colonial legacies, religious diversity, and the abundance of strategic resources—particularly oil and gas—the region has long been a battleground for competing interests among both regional and global powers. Among the most significant and enduring rivalries in the region is the antagonistic relationship between the State of Israel and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Johnson & Wei, 2024). This rivalry is rooted

in deep ideological, political, and strategic contradictions, and it continues to have profound implications for regional security, alliance formation, and the broader global order.

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's regional strategy has increasingly emphasized the export of revolutionary ideology, support for armed non-state actors, and the pursuit of strategic depth throughout the Levant (Foster, 2024). In contrast, Israel perceives Iran's expanding influence as an existential threat—particularly due to its



nuclear ambitions, support for Hezbollah and Palestinian militant groups, and military entrenchment in Syria. This antagonism has evolved into a multidimensional conflict involving cyber operations, targeted assassinations, economic sanctions, and direct or proxy military engagements. Recent escalations—such as Israel’s targeted strikes on Iranian military assets in Syria and retaliatory actions by Iranian proxies—have intensified regional tensions and raised fears of a broader confrontation.

These developments have catalyzed significant shifts in the regional balance of power, prompting both state and non-state actors to reassess their strategic positions (Farouki, 2021). The normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab states under the Abraham Accords reflects a major turning point. Motivated partly by shared concerns over Iran’s influence, countries like the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco have reoriented their foreign policies to accommodate both economic modernization and security cooperation with Israel. This emerging axis of pragmatic cooperation illustrates the increasing fluidity of regional alliances and the declining relevance of traditional ideological and sectarian divides.

Meanwhile, Iran has responded by reinforcing its regional influence through asymmetric strategies, strengthening alliances with Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Shia militias in Iraq and Yemen. This network—often referred to as the “Axis of Resistance”—has allowed Iran to project power beyond its borders using hybrid tactics that challenge the conventional military capabilities of its rivals. The resulting security landscape is characterized by multiple layers of state and

non-state interactions, making it increasingly complex and unpredictable.

The broader geopolitical ramifications of the Israel-Iran conflict also extend beyond the region. The United States continues to play a critical role as Israel’s key ally, although its Middle East strategy has become more fragmented in recent years. Its withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the implementation of the “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran have exacerbated tensions and contributed to strategic instability. Russia, meanwhile, has expanded its influence through its military intervention in Syria, positioning itself as a mediator between conflicting parties. China’s growing economic presence in the region, particularly through infrastructure investments and trade partnerships, signals an emerging shift toward multipolarity, where global powers pursue divergent but intersecting interests.

In this complex and evolving environment, understanding the current configuration of power in the Middle East is both urgent and essential. The region is no longer defined by rigid alliances or binary oppositions. Instead, it reflects a multipolar order characterized by strategic pragmatism, shifting loyalties, and fluctuating threat perceptions. The Israel-Iran conflict serves as a critical lens through which broader regional and international dynamics can be examined—from state fragility and the rise of non-state actors to the recalibration of external interventions.

This paper aims to explore the post-conflict configuration of power in the Middle East through a geopolitical lens. It seeks to answer key questions: How has the Israel-Iran confrontation reshaped regional alliances and enmities? What are the strategic implications



for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Turkey, and non-state actors like Hezbollah and Hamas? How have global powers adjusted their roles in light of these tensions? Ultimately, what are the prospects for regional stability or further escalation?

Drawing on both realist and constructivist theoretical frameworks, this study investigates how power in the Middle East is not only distributed materially but also constructed through security narratives, identity politics, and the perception of threats. By situating the Israel-Iran conflict within this broader context, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the shifting architecture of power in one of the most contested and strategically significant regions in the world.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, using a descriptive-analytical approach to examine the evolving configuration of power in the Middle East following the heightened tensions between Israel and Iran. The research is primarily based on secondary data collected from a wide range of reputable sources, including academic journal articles, policy papers, government reports, and news publications published between 2018 and 2025. Content analysis is utilized to systematically interpret these sources and identify key geopolitical shifts, alliance patterns, and strategic responses by state and non-state actors (Khan, 2022). In addition, the study draws on theoretical insights from both realism and constructivism in international relations to frame the analysis—realism to understand material power dynamics and security competition, and constructivism to explore how identities, narratives, and perceptions influence foreign policy behavior.

Case studies of specific events—such as Israel’s military operations in Syria, Iran’s regional proxy engagements, and the normalization agreements under the Abraham Accords—are used to illustrate the broader patterns of change within the region. Triangulation is applied to cross-verify findings from different sources to enhance validity and reduce bias. The research does not seek to make predictive claims, but rather to provide an in-depth, context-driven understanding of how recent conflicts have reshaped the regional geopolitical structure. Given the fast-evolving nature of Middle Eastern politics, particular attention is given to developments occurring after 2020, a period marked by intensified strategic realignments and heightened foreign involvement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study reveal several key shifts in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East following the intensification of tensions between Israel and Iran.

The findings of this study reveal several key shifts in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East following the intensification of tensions between Israel and Iran. First and foremost, one of the most significant outcomes has been the realignment of regional alliances, marking a fundamental departure from the traditional fault lines that had long defined Middle Eastern politics. Historically, the Arab-Israeli divide constituted the core ideological and political axis that influenced most inter-state relations in the region. This division was not only rooted in the unresolved Palestinian issue but also in the legacy of pan-Arab nationalism and collective resistance against perceived Western-backed actors. However, the growing threat perception surrounding Iran’s regional



behavior—particularly its nuclear ambitions, ballistic missile development, and patronage of proxy militias—has prompted a remarkable shift in strategic priorities among certain Arab states.

In recent years, countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have demonstrated a willingness to transcend historical animosities and engage in open, formalized cooperation with Israel. This culminated in the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020, which institutionalized diplomatic, economic, and security relations between these countries and Israel. While initially perceived as symbolic, the partnerships have since evolved into substantive collaborations, including joint military exercises, counterterrorism initiatives, intelligence exchanges, and cybersecurity cooperation. These developments signal a broader regional trend toward *realpolitik*, where national security concerns and economic interests outweigh ideological commitments.

Moreover, the normalization of ties with Israel has provided Gulf states with enhanced access to Israeli technology, particularly in fields such as defense systems, artificial intelligence, and water resource management (Carter, 2021). These partnerships are also strategically useful in bolstering the Gulf monarchies' defense postures amid perceived inconsistencies in U.S. security commitments to the region. By aligning more closely with Israel—one of the most advanced military powers in the region—these states aim to create a deterrent balance against Iran's growing regional assertiveness.

Importantly, this shift is not confined to the Gulf alone. Other countries, such as Sudan and Morocco, have also initiated

normalization processes, suggesting that the Israel-Iran rivalry has become a driving factor in reshaping broader Arab foreign policy orientations. The formation of these new partnerships illustrates the emergence of a *de facto* regional bloc, loosely organized around shared security concerns and an implicit opposition to Iranian influence. Although these alignments do not constitute a formal military alliance, their increasing institutional depth reflects a convergence of interests that could significantly alter the strategic architecture of the Middle East in the years to come.

This realignment also has domestic political implications. For some Gulf leaders, closer ties with Israel serve as a signal to both domestic and international audiences of their states' modernization trajectories and independent foreign policy strategies. At the same time, this shift has provoked criticism from some domestic and regional actors who view normalization as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause (Sayed, 2023). Thus, while the geopolitical benefits of these new alignments are clear, they must also be managed carefully to avoid internal backlash or regional polarization.

In conclusion, the evolving cooperation between Israel and certain Arab states underscores a fundamental transformation in Middle Eastern geopolitics. The Iran threat has not only redefined security priorities but also created new pathways for diplomacy and collaboration that would have been unimaginable just a decade ago. This reflects a pragmatic turn in regional politics, where strategic interests are taking precedence over long-standing ideological divides.

Second, the Israel-Iran confrontation has significantly reinforced Iran's reliance on asymmetric warfare and proxy-based



influence as core pillars of its regional strategy. Confronted with growing Israeli military pressure—manifested through precision airstrikes, cyberattacks, and covert operations—as well as enduring international isolation due to sanctions and diplomatic marginalization, Iran has opted to double down on its network of allied non-state actors to preserve and expand its strategic depth. Rather than engaging in direct conventional warfare, which would expose Iran to overwhelming retaliation, Tehran continues to project power indirectly by arming, funding, and guiding paramilitary and ideological allies across the region.

Central to this strategy is Hezbollah, the Lebanese-based militant group and political party that has evolved into Iran's most capable and loyal proxy. Hezbollah's advanced missile capabilities, combat experience, and deeply rooted infrastructure in Lebanon make it a formidable deterrent against Israeli military actions. Beyond deterrence, Hezbollah serves as an instrument for Iran to apply pressure on Israel's northern front, effectively creating a buffer zone while maintaining plausible deniability for Tehran. In the event of a wider conflict, Hezbollah is expected to play a frontline role, opening multiple battlefronts that would strain Israel's defense capacity.

In Iraq, Iran has cultivated a network of Shia militias under the umbrella of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), many of which operate with substantial autonomy and ideological alignment to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). These groups not only contribute to Iran's ability to influence Iraqi domestic politics but also offer Tehran the capability to threaten U.S. and allied interests in the region. Their integration into Iraq's security structure blurs the lines

between state and non-state authority, complicating counterterrorism efforts and allowing Iran to embed itself within official state institutions without formal military deployment.

The Houthis in Yemen further illustrate the strategic utility of Iran's proxy model. Despite Tehran's limited direct control, its provision of weapons, training, and political support to the Houthis has enabled the group to launch ballistic missile and drone attacks against key targets in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—both close allies of Israel and adversaries of Iran. These attacks not only disrupt regional energy markets but also extend Iran's reach into the Arabian Peninsula, thus broadening the geographic scope of its deterrent capabilities.

Syria remains a critical theater for Iran's projection of power. Under the guise of supporting the Assad regime during the civil war, Iran has established a robust military and logistical presence throughout the country, including the construction of weapons depots, training camps, and transportation corridors linking Tehran to Beirut via Baghdad and Damascus—often referred to as the "Shia Crescent." This land corridor facilitates the flow of arms and fighters, enabling Iran to maintain constant pressure on Israel's northern borders. Although Israeli airstrikes have targeted many of these facilities, Iran's commitment to Syria remains strong, signaling its intent to institutionalize its long-term influence in the Levant.

Iran's asymmetric strategy is not limited to military dimensions. It also includes cyber operations, information warfare, and ideological outreach, often directed through media channels, religious institutions, and cultural centers (Bennett & Khalil, 2023). This multi-pronged approach allows Iran to



challenge Israeli and Western narratives while cultivating support among sympathetic communities across the region. By framing itself as the leader of the "resistance axis" against Zionism and Western imperialism, Iran attempts to legitimize its role as a regional power broker and moral authority, particularly among disenfranchised Shia populations.

In summary, Iran's deepening reliance on asymmetric and proxy-based strategies reflects both its limitations and its adaptability. Lacking the conventional military superiority of its adversaries, Iran has mastered the art of strategic depth through non-state actors, irregular warfare, and indirect confrontation. This model not only preserves Iranian influence across multiple conflict zones but also increases the complexity of Israel's threat environment, forcing Israeli policymakers to prepare for multidimensional and protracted conflicts that are difficult to contain through traditional means.

Third, the findings clearly indicate that non-state actors have become increasingly central in shaping the power dynamics of the Middle East, fundamentally altering the traditional state-centric nature of regional politics (Davies, 2022). The persistent conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen have created a security environment where the lines between state and non-state entities are increasingly blurred. Armed groups, militias, and political factions operating outside formal state control have established transnational networks that transcend borders, challenging the conventional concept of state sovereignty and complicating diplomatic engagements. These actors wield significant military capabilities and enjoy substantial local support, allowing them to

influence the balance of power in ways that formal state militaries often cannot.

In Syria and Iraq, for example, numerous militias affiliated with Iran, including various Shia paramilitary groups and local defense units, have entrenched themselves within the local security apparatuses. Their loyalty to Tehran rather than their nominal home governments has created parallel centers of power, contributing to fragmented authority and contested legitimacy. These groups not only serve as military forces but also as political actors shaping governance and local administration. Their presence makes it difficult for central governments to exert full control, thereby creating zones of influence that benefit Iran's broader regional ambitions.

Israel, recognizing this fragmented security environment, has adapted its military and intelligence strategies accordingly. Instead of engaging in large-scale conventional warfare, Israel has increasingly relied on precision airstrikes targeting key figures and infrastructure associated with hostile non-state actors. This approach aims to disrupt the operational capabilities of militias and prevent their consolidation, while minimizing broader escalations. Israeli intelligence agencies also engage in covert operations, cyber warfare, and information campaigns designed to undermine these groups' networks (Aziz, 2022). These tactics reflect a nuanced understanding that today's conflicts are often fought in the shadows, involving decentralized actors that require tailored responses.

Meanwhile, Iran has intensified its investment in ideological and military mobilization to maintain the loyalty and effectiveness of its proxy forces. Through religious, social, and political channels, Tehran



promotes a narrative of resistance against foreign intervention and Zionism, which resonates deeply among certain communities. This ideological commitment is reinforced by material support, including arms supplies, training, and financial assistance, enabling militias to sustain long-term operations and expand their influence. The mobilization of these groups is often accompanied by efforts to integrate them into local societies, through social services or political representation, enhancing their legitimacy and entrenchment.

The rise of non-state actors also complicates regional diplomacy and conflict resolution efforts. Their involvement often leads to overlapping interests and rivalries that cut across traditional state boundaries, making negotiations more complex and protracted. Moreover, these actors can act as spoilers or power brokers in peace processes, leveraging their local influence to negotiate for autonomy or political concessions. This dynamic challenges the capacity of regional and international actors to mediate conflicts effectively and demands a more holistic understanding of the multifaceted nature of power in the Middle East.

In sum, the growing centrality of non-state actors has transformed the Middle East into a mosaic of competing authorities and interests, where power is exercised through diverse and often informal networks. Both Israel and Iran have demonstrated strategic adaptability in navigating this environment—Israel through targeted precision and intelligence-led operations, and Iran through sustained ideological and military patronage. This evolution underscores the need to reconsider traditional geopolitical frameworks and recognize the critical role of non-state actors in shaping the future

trajectory of the region's security landscape (Harbi, 2023).

Fourth, the study highlights a significant shift in the roles and strategies of global powers as they respond to the escalating tensions between Israel and Iran, further complicating the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The United States remains Israel's primary security partner, providing advanced military technology, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic support that underpin Israel's qualitative military edge in the region. However, the broader U.S. strategy in the Middle East has become increasingly unpredictable and fragmented over recent years, particularly following changes in administration and shifts in foreign policy priorities. The U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and the subsequent "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran exemplify this ambivalence, which has led to increased regional volatility rather than deterrence. Additionally, Washington's recalibration toward a more Asia-focused global posture and its attempts to reduce military commitments have created concerns among regional allies about the reliability of American security guarantees.

At the same time, Russia has emerged as a pivotal actor seeking to consolidate its influence in the Middle East through a carefully calibrated balancing act between competing regional powers, including Iran and Israel. Russia's military intervention in Syria since 2015 has not only bolstered the Assad regime but also positioned Moscow as an indispensable power broker capable of mediating conflicts and negotiating ceasefires. This role allows Russia to maintain cooperative ties with Tehran, which depends



on Moscow's airspace and logistical support, while simultaneously managing a tacit understanding with Israel, who conducts regular strikes against Iranian targets in Syria. Russia's ability to juggle these competing interests underscores its strategic ambition to project power beyond its traditional spheres of influence and shape regional outcomes on its own terms.

Meanwhile, China's expanding economic footprint in the Middle East introduces yet another dimension to the evolving power configuration. China has actively pursued infrastructure development projects under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), investing heavily in ports, energy facilities, and transportation corridors across the region. China's approach emphasizes economic engagement and energy security over military intervention, positioning itself as a partner committed to regional stability and development without direct involvement in security disputes. By maintaining a neutral stance on contentious issues such as the Israel-Iran rivalry, China aims to safeguard its vast commercial interests while gradually increasing its diplomatic clout. This economic-driven presence serves as a counterbalance to traditional Western influence and signals a gradual shift toward a more multipolar order in Middle Eastern affairs.

The growing involvement of these global powers, each with differing priorities and strategies, adds layers of complexity to the regional order. Their intersecting interests often lead to overlapping spheres of influence and competing agendas that complicate conflict resolution efforts (Suleiman, 2023). For instance, while the U.S. emphasizes containing Iran's nuclear program, Russia focuses on stabilizing Syria, and China pursues economic expansion—all of which impact the

Israel-Iran dynamic in distinct ways. This multipolar environment challenges regional actors to navigate a labyrinth of external pressures while pursuing their own national interests, further intensifying the unpredictability of Middle Eastern geopolitics.

In summary, the shifting roles of the United States, Russia, and China illustrate how global power competition is increasingly entangled with regional conflicts. Their diverse approaches not only influence the trajectory of the Israel-Iran confrontation but also reshape the broader security architecture of the Middle East, making the pursuit of lasting stability ever more complex and contingent on multilateral engagement (Levinson & Green, 2023).

Finally, the findings suggest that the traditional frameworks used to understand Middle Eastern geopolitics—such as Sunni versus Shia, or Arab versus non-Arab—are becoming less relevant. Instead, pragmatic considerations related to national interests, regime survival, and economic modernization are playing a more decisive role in shaping foreign policy decisions. This is evident in the normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states, which have prioritized economic and technological cooperation over ideological opposition. Similarly, Iran's outreach to non-Arab partners and non-state actors highlights the increasing salience of strategic flexibility over fixed alliances.

In summary, the Israel-Iran conflict has acted as a catalyst for broader geopolitical transformation in the Middle East. The emerging regional order is more fluid, decentralized, and driven by pragmatic considerations. While this may offer new opportunities for cooperation and conflict management, it also increases the unpredictability of regional politics, requiring



continuous reassessment of strategies by both regional and global actors.

CONCLUSIONS

This study reveals that the escalating tensions between Israel and Iran have triggered significant transformations in the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. First, there has been a realignment of regional alliances that breaks away from the traditional Arab-Israeli divide, with several Arab states—particularly in the Gulf—normalizing relations with Israel to address shared security and economic interests, primarily as a response to the perceived Iranian threat. Second, Iran has increasingly relied on asymmetric warfare and proxy actors as its primary means to maintain and expand its influence across the region while avoiding direct military confrontation.

Third, non-state actors have become central to the power dynamics in the region, blurring the lines between state authority and armed groups that also function as political and military forces. Fourth, the involvement of global powers—namely the United States, Russia, and China—with their differing agendas and approaches has added layers of complexity, creating a multipolar environment that demands careful multilateral diplomacy. Finally, traditional geopolitical frameworks such as Sunni versus Shia or Arab versus non-Arab are losing relevance, replaced by pragmatic considerations focused on national interests, regime survival, and economic modernization.

Overall, the Israel-Iran conflict has acted as a catalyst for profound geopolitical change, resulting in a more fluid, decentralized, and pragmatic regional order. While this new environment offers fresh opportunities for cooperation and conflict management, it also increases

unpredictability, requiring ongoing strategic reassessment by both regional and global actors

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