COOPERATION AND CONFLICT BETWEEN IRAN AND ISRAEL IN THE QUEST FOR POWER AND REGIONAL HEGEMONY

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Keywords

Conflict, Realism, Balance of Power, Hegemony

Abstract

Research Problem
The relationship between Iran andIsrealreflects the regional power politics in the Middle-East. It further explicates the struggle for power and ascendency to regional hegemony. Both nations had cooperative relations until the Islamic Revolution in 1979 when relations deteriorated between the Middle-Eastern nations. Nonetheless, in Post Iran revolution, there have been cause to cooperate between the two limitedly. This research examines the enduring rivalry between Iran and Israel through a multi-dimensional theoretical framework, focusing on their competing quests for regional hegemony other than secondary factors like identity, religion and ideology.

Research Methods/theory
The study utilizes a qualitative approach of secondary data collection where textbooks, journals and internet sources were used. The paper incorporates multiple theories in explaining the Iran-Israeli relations vis-à-vis conflict and cooperation. Utilizing Offensive Realism, the study analyzes both states as "power maximizers" responding to the Middle East's anarchic structure, where Iran seeks "breakout capacity" and Israel employs pre-emptive security measures to maintain a favorable balance of power. The paper incorporates Social Constructivism, illustrating how the 1979 Revolution transformed the relationship from strategic cooperation into an existential conflict driven by "identity securitization" and the Iranian "resistance" narrative. Furthermore, Neoclassical Realism is applied to demonstrate how domestic political survival and elite perceptions mediate systemic pressures, explaining the shift between

revisionist and status quo behaviors. The analysis also considers Hegemonic Stability Theory in the context of current "multipolar fragmentation" and U.S. retrenchment, which has exacerbated strategic miscalculations and heightened the risk of direct confrontation in 2025.

Key contributions to knowledge

The study adds to the existing body of literature on the subject matter and gives a perspective on the importance of power and regional hegemony other than primordial considerations like race and religion.

Recommendation

The paper recommends that high level diplomacy must be an instrument open for the management of relations between Iran and Israel to avoid any escalations into regional wide conflict.

Introduction

Conflict ensues when two or more parties share mutually incompatible goals. It is also seen as a state of tension that arises because there are irreconcilable contradictions between two or more parties with regard to a certain good. Indeed, the conflict between and Iran and Israel at its high has been occasioned by heightened tensions due to incompatible goals and irreconcilable contradictions. Even though, historically, prior to the 1979 revolution in Iran, both parties found a middle ground for cooperation. The relations between both nations deteriorated in after the fall of the Palavi dynasty and the rise of Ayatollah Khameini.

Whereas both nations are located in the Middle-East, they do not share territorial boundaries nor make territorial claims. But what defines the conduct of the relations that exists between them is consistent with the *realpolitik* precept of the pursuit of power for the goals of national interest.

Iran is predominantly an Islamic (Shi'a) nation which boasts of a largely non-Arab populace. But it finds itself competing with other Arab nations that assert themselves as regional hegemons. With notable power houses such as Egypt (especially under Gamal Abdel Nasser – a staunch leader of Pan-Arabian sentiments); Saudi Arabia with an Arab population of over ninety per-cent is predominantly Muslim practicing a variety of Islam known as Sunni; Iraq is about eighty per-cent Arab, whose religion is vastly Islam, practicing the Shi'a version. Under Saddam Hussein, it was controlled by a Ba'athist government which was officially secular but was dominated by Sunni Muslims. Iraq shares its border with Iran.

On the other hand, Israel is located in the middle-east, it however has no contiguity to Iran. Interestingly rather, Israel which is largely Judaic, has its dominant population to be Jew is surrounded by Arab nations which are Egypt, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. They are largely Muslim.

Jewish Zionism which peaked in the 19th Century due to the antisemitism in Europe and consequent persecution and elimination of Jews led to a movement for the return of Jews to their homeland. The quest towards the attainment of Statehood on 'Mandatory Palestine' and eventual realization of the state of Israel drew the ire of Arabs in the region whom are sympathetic to the plight of Palestinians (who still have no recognized state). Yet, Iran in the fray didn't start off as a bellicose state towards Israel. Indeed, it tacitly recognized the creation of Israel. What then triggered their conflict?

While classical scholars like Hans Morgenthau's theoretical postulations will hinge on power aggrandizement, Mearsheimer (2001) aligns in that though train.

However contemporary views on the conflict pays attention to other factors such as identity, religion and ideology. For example, Morris (2001) observed that the creation of Israel heightened the longstanding hostility from Arab states that are sympathetic to the Palestinian displacement. This meant that, Israel's expansion from Palestinian displacement will further increase Isreal's power and influence in the middle-east. Scholars like Takeyh (2009) adduced that the rivalry intensified after the Iranian Revolution thereby pointing at the ideological cause for the conflict. Closely linked to region and ideology, Litvak (2020) argued that modern Iranian nationalism is an admixture of Shi'a religious identity with state ideology. This reinforces the hostile view against Israel as part of Iran's broader politico-religious worldview. Similarly, Roomi (2023) is of the view that Iran's anti-Israeli rhetoric by its government in order to garner domestic political support thereby assuming the position as leader of the Muslim world is the source of its hostility. Roomi's opinion is reinforced by the views of Baidhowi, Truna and Rosyad (2024) who identify religious reasons as an instrument used by both Iran and Israel to foster their rivalry. While Iran sees it as a sacred duty in its struggle with Israel, Israel draws religious and historical claims connected to Jewish identity and the land of Jerusalem.

This paper recognizes the role of identity, religion and ideology but argues that the essential elemental factor that sustains the conflict is the pursuit for Power for Regional Hegemony in the Middle East.

Background to the Conflict Between Iran and Israel

Farhang observed that from its foundation in 1948 Israel regarded the establishment of formal political ties with Iran as a strategic goal for its foreign policy. In addition to the importance of Iran as a non-Arab state in the Middle East, the Iranian government at the time was particularly valued by Israel because it was willing to provide a route for the flight of Iraqi Jews to Israel (Farhang, 1989:89). In tandem with the above position, the Pahlavi dynasty which reigned from 1925 to 1979 was anything but hostile to Israel. Motamedi (2023), further states that, Iran was, in fact, the second Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel after it was founded in 1948 after Turkey.

Iran in its strategic thinking wasn't unaware of its predominantly Arab neighbors, which although Muslims also, they varied in Islamic sects. Iran is majorly Shi'a but the government in Iraq is Sunni, and Saudi Arabia is Sunni. Hence, Iran craved to curtail the influence of Iraq, Saudi Arabia and the Pan-Arab government in Egypt under Gamal Abdel Nasser whom are all Sunni dominated. To succeed in balancing the overwhelming Arab influence, ties to the west was essential through Israel. There were common fears shared between Iran and Israel which forged the need for their cooperation. Chief amongst those fears were the rising regime in Iraq which in turn was critical of the surging Shi'a ideology having an impact in Iraq. This was viewed by the Ba'athist government as a potential of exploiting sectarian tensions in Iraq by rallying Iraq's Shi'a majority against the Ba'athist government, which was officially secular and dominated by Sunni Muslims.

In furtherance of its security interests, Iran sought economic and military cooperation with Israel. Despite the domestic censure and

pressure from the Iran clergy, Iran went ahead in secrecy to conduct clandestine commercial relations. Therefore, 'to cover its tracks, Iran and Israel established new companies in Panama and Switzerland under a central legal entity known as Trans-Asiatic Oil, which served as the operating base of the top-secret partnership that existed between Israel and the National Iranian Oil Company in the late 1970s. The Eilat-Ashkelon Pipeline Company, which provided Iranian oil to Israel, grew as a subsidiary of Trans-Asiatic Oil' (Kaye et al., 2011). Also, the Shah favoured ties to the US and held the perception that Israel could foster the connection, and in fact, the Arab Oil boycott of 1973 provided the avenue for oil sales to Israel and the USA. The oil revenues helped in advancing Iran's military interests.

Furthermore, Iraq formed a point of convergence for Iran-Israeli cooperation. According to Kaye (11), 'by the 1960s, Israel was supporting Iraqi Kurds fighting the central regime; Iran also viewed the Iraqi Kurds as the Iraqi regime's Achilles' heel. Thus, the Mossad and the SAVAK, Israel's and Iran's intelligence organizations, joined forces in aiding the Kurds in their struggle against the Iraqi central government'. Noteworthy is the fact that Israel through its secret intelligence, the MOSSAD partly trained the Iranian secret intelligence arm, the SAVAK. To buttress the point, Farhang (1989:87) asserts that, Iranian-Israeli relations took a drastic turn in the late 1950s when the Shah sought Israel's assistance in building and administering the SAVAK (secret police force). The Israeli government welcomed the initiative and thus its intelligence service, Mossad, along with the CIA, came to be closely associated with SAVAK. Then in the late 1960s, when the oil price increases were under way and the shah's multi-billion-dollar military purchases began, Iran became a crucial export market for Israeli arms, about one-half-billion dollars a year in the 70s (Kaye et al., 2011). The enhancement of these ties can be attributed to the posture and moderateness of the Shah to the West which automatically brings Israel into the equation, America's main ally in the middle-east.

On the other hand, Israel abreast with the realization that it is surrounded by hostile Arab nations who are sympathetic to the Palestinians devised a policy to enable it balance the power in the region. Thus, the nation of Israel initiated the Periphery Doctrine. The doctrine called for Israel to pursue exceptionally close bilateral ties with certain non-Arab nations throughout the Middle East and North Africa, with the ultimate goal of establishing a reliable counterweight to the large Arab military coalitions that had been fighting in the Arab–Israeli conflict. The policy was employed chiefly with regard to Turkey, the Imperial State of Iran, the Ethiopian Empire, and the Kurdish people living in Iraq and Syria (Reisinezhad, 2018). Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion developed the periphery doctrine in the 1950s; it was based on the premise that Israel would have to establish close relations with the region's non-Arab countries to protect itself from hostile Arab neighbours (Kaye et al., 2011). Consequently, Israel and Iran established diplomatic ties with the latter setting up an embassy in Tehran despite the domestic criticisms to the government in Tehran. Motamedi (2023) concludes that, Israel needed Iran more than Iran needed Israel, it was Israel that was always the proactive party, but the Shah also wanted a way to improve Iran's relations with the US, and at the time Israel was seen as a good way to achieve that aim'.

The mutual relations between Iran and Israel remained cordial, even though some were shrouded in secrecy to avoid censure from the Iranian populace, it will come to a sore and sour

juncture in 1979 after the execution of the Islamic Revolution and the ascendancy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini as the Supreme Leader of Islamic Republic of Iran.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a multi-dimensional theoretical approach, primarily anchored in the Realist School of international relations, but supplemented by Social Constructivism and Offensive Realism to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Iran-Israel rivalry.

Realist thought is premised on the notion that the international system is anarchic, hence Evans and Newnham state that since the purpose of statecraft is national survival in a hostile environment, the acquisition of power is the proper, rational and inevitable goal of foreign policy (1998:465). However, this pursuit for power creates competition and conflict amongst nations which inadvertently creates a state of affairs referred to as the security dilemma. The race to fortify one's state's security creates a sense of insecurity in another state which intensifies conflict. Essentially, power capabilities of a state are germane to its survival.

The realist assumption that the state's main objective is survival, power maximization and security explicate the conflict between Iran and Israel. Because no sooner had the US conquered Iraq, Iran sought to be the preponderant power in the region. Iran equally increased its power and perceived its security to be tied to the annihilation of Israel, the only other state that wields tremendous power in the region.

While classical realism focuses on the pursuit of power for survival, Offensive Realism—as advanced by John Mearsheimer—posits that the international system's anarchic nature encourages states to maximize their relative power and ultimately seek regional hegemony to ensure their security (Naderimahdi et al., 2025). In the Middle East, both Iran and Israel behave as "power maximizers" (Akar, 2025).Iran's strategic posture, particularly its nuclear ambiguity and support for proxy groups like Hezbollah, is viewed through this lens as a rational (albeit risky) attempt to achieve "breakout capacity" and regional dominance (Akar, 2025; Siddiqi & Khairunnisa, 2025). Conversely, Israel's "Periphery Doctrine" and its pre-emptive security measures, such as the targeting of Iranian nuclear facilities, are strategic counter-expansions intended to prevent any single power from tilting the regional balance in a way that threatens Israeli survival (Al-Barasneh, 2025; Siddiqi & Khairunnisa, 2025).

Social constructivism compliments the foregoing theory by explaining the perceptions and world view of Iran and Israel through the lens of identity. The 1979 Revolution marked a shift that Realism alone cannot fully explain, thus the transition from strategic cooperation to existential enmity based on identity. Social Constructivism is essential here, as it emphasizes how "ideological narratives fuel hostilities" (Siddiqi & Khairunnisa, 2025).The conflict is not merely about material power but about the "intersubjective identity formation" of the two states (Al-Barasneh, 2025). Iran's post-revolutionary identity is constructed around a "resistance" narrative against the "Zionist regime," while Israel's security policy is deeply influenced by historical narratives and its identity as a Jewish state (Rafaqat, 2025). This "identity securitization" means that threat perception is shaped by internal political narratives that frame the rival as an existential challenger, making conflict resolution more difficult than simple power-balancing would suggest (Al-Barasneh, 2025).

Finally, the document can benefit from Hegemonic Stability Theory, which suggests that regional stability is more likely when one power predominates. The current instability between Iran and Israel is exacerbated by a "multipolar fragmentation" in the Middle East (Al-Barasneh, 2025). As the United States undergoes a "military pullback" or "retrenchment," regional powers like Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia are forced into more aggressive competition for dominance, as there is no longer a clear hegemon or cooperative architecture to regulate the rivalry (Al-Barasneh, 2025).

The Iran-Israeli Conflict in Perspective

As noted elsewhere, Iran and Israel have had cooperative endeavors and were not sworn enemies prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The two countries were allies until the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, which brought in a regime that has used opposing Israel as a key part of its ideology. Under Khomeini, the moderate ties between both nations were cut off as Israel was declared as an enemy of Islam, this was the first foreign policy pronouncement. Furthermore, Israel was now called “the little Satan” while the US was referred to as “the great Satan”. The de facto Israeli embassy in Tehran was closed as holders of Israeli passports were not accepted anymore.

Farhang (1989) notes that, the severing of ties to Israel by revolutionary Iran was its first foreign policy action which quite intentionally was announced on the day Yasser Arafat was visiting Tehran. The Palestinian Liberation organization leader was the first foreign leader to visit revolutionary Iran. He was warmly welcomed by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.

Consequently, the de facto Israeli embassy in Tehran was made the Palestinian embassy.

In its bid to spread its ideology beyond Iran, the Persian Gulf Arab states were targeted for the Islamic revolution. Most of these Arab states were regimes backed by the US which the Iranian government referred to as “the Great Satan”. this is why Kaye et’al (2011) described Islamic Iran’s initial foreign policy as overzealous and ideological. The intention was to stir Shi’a populations in these Arab Gulf countries (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq). However, they note that, Iran’s efforts to overthrow the old order were largely ineffective and, in many ways, counterproductive. Faced with the threat of a revolutionary Iran, the Persian Gulf states formed the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 and aided Saddam Hussein’s military conflict with Iran.

According to Raxoux, (2015), Iran's hostility led to an escalation of rhetoric between Ayatollah Khomeini and Iraqi President Hussein, a Sunni who advocated for secular Pan-Arab nationalism. Also, Efraim (2002) points that, with the turmoil in Iran, because of the revolution, Saddam Hussein saw an opening to take Iran's Khuzestan province which had Iran's southern oilfields and an Arab majority. By early 1980, it became evident to both countries that preparation for possible war would be a necessary measure. And yet again, Iran found itself in an uncomfortable but inevitable need for Israeli support. Fortunately, they shared Iraq as a common enemy. During the Shah’s reign, the Iranian army was mainly equipped with weapons of US and Israeli origin, and the supply opportunities for these weapons were cut off after the revolution. However, the arms relations had to resume under these conditions. Israel, which sees Iraq as a more significant threat than its former ally Iran would rather realign with Iran once again, besides, the war was an arms trade opportunity which Israel supplied weapons to Iran in exchange for oil (Baltaci, 2022). This

is evidential of some devices used in managing the balance of power, shifting and countervailing alliances.

After the first Gulf War and the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the new Supreme Leader Ali Khameini increased the rhetoric of anti-Israeli sentiments. He referred to Israel as "cancerous tumor" that should be removed from the region. In 2005, he emphasized that "Palestine belongs to Palestinians, and the fate of Palestine should also be determined by the Palestinian people" (Khamenei, 2005). By 2005, Kaye et'al (2011) observed that, the election of Iranian President Ahmadinejad in 2005 and his virulent anti-Israel rhetoric and Holocaust denials only exacerbated Israeli fears of Iran. This follows the events that left both Iraq and Afghanistan diminished in power after the US invasion in 2003. Thus, Iran became emboldened and was seeking to solidify its position as regional hegemon which Israel stood as the only opposition to that ambition. Iran began strengthening ties and support to resistance groups in Lebanon, Syria and Palestine who to fight Israel. Kaye et'al (2011) concludes that, the Israelis began viewing Iran as the source of every regional conflict they faced as they perceived Iranian ties strengthening with such non-state actors as Hamas and Hezbollah, threatening stability in areas bordering Israel.

In pursuit of increasing its influence in the region, Iran began development of its nuclear capability and a series of proxy wars ensued between both countries. The conduct of this warfare took shadow forms, with all kinds of sabotage, assassinations and guerrilla warfare. To limit Iran's advancement in nuclear development, In the first attack, particle physicist Masoud-Alimohammadi was killed on 12 January 2010 when a booby-trapped motorcycle parked near his car exploded. On 12 October 2010, an explosion occurred at an IRGC military base near the city of Khorramabad, killing 18 soldiers (Yong, 2010). On 29 November 2010, two senior Iranian nuclear scientists, MajidShahriari and FereydoonAbbasi, were targeted by hitmen on motorcycles, who attached bombs to their cars and detonated them from a distance. Kim (2013) reports that in June 2010, *Stuxnet*, an advanced computer worm, was discovered. It is believed that it had been developed by US and Israel to attack Iran's nuclear facilities. By implication, the overwhelming driving reason for the confrontation lies in what Kaye (2011:25) aptly describes that "growing Israeli concerns about Iran did not only emerge as a result of Iran's rising military capabilities and association with terrorist groups and activities. Israelis have also become increasingly disturbed by what they view as rising Iranian influence tipping the regional balance of power in favor of "resistance" groups at the expense of the United States and its regional allies.

In recent times, the escalation of conflict and mutual suspicion reached its crescendo on October 7, 2023 when the Hamas, a Palestinian militant group whom receives funding from Iran, caused and incursion in the Kibbutz area of Israel during a music festival, killing as many as 1200 people while taking over 100 hostages. Israel in a series of retaliatory attacks, have fought on more than three fronts including Hamas in Palestine, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria. Indeed, Israel has targeted Iranian top military officials in Lebanon and Syria whom are part of the Iranian support to the resistance forces in conflict with Israel. Notable Iranian military officers killed were RaziMousavi and Mohammad Reza Zahedi in 2024.

The conflict became tensed and heightened in April which brought parties in direct

confrontation. Vinograd (2024) reported that, a strike on an Iranian Embassy building in Damascus on April 1 killed three top Iranian commanders and four officers. This was viewed as a disregard for international customary law as it relates to diplomatic privileges encapsulated in the 1961 Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations and the 1963 Vienna Convention on Consular Relations. Embassies are protected sanctuaries that embody the sovereignty of a nation that occupies it. Article 22 on the Convention of Diplomatic Relations states that;

"The premises of the mission shall be inviolable. The agents of the receiving State may not enter them, except with the consent of the head of the mission. The receiving State is under a special duty to take all appropriate steps to protect the premises of the mission against any intrusion or damage and to prevent any disturbance of the peace of the mission or impairment of its dignity." According to Reporting for the New York Times, Amanda Taub added that "those protections remain in force even if the embassy is used for criminal or military purposes. The receiving state can break off diplomatic relations, or revoke the diplomatic immunity of specific individuals and eject them from the country, but it must still "respect and protect" the embassy buildings and their contents even after the mission has closed."

Iran blamed Israel and vowed to hit back forcefully. Two weeks later, Tehran launched a barrage of more than 300 drones and missiles at Israel, an unexpectedly large-scale attack, although nearly all the weapons were shot down by Israel and its allies.

Israel vowed to conduct a retaliatory attack which Iran said if it did, they will retaliate harder. Nevertheless, on 19 April 2024, Israel retaliated against Iran. Israel attacked three targets in or near Isfahan International Airport, including a military base. One of the targets was a radar for the Natanz nuclear site. Iran claimed that its air defence shot down all Israeli projectiles and that the explosions were from air defence, but satellite images showed a destroyed air defence battery and damage to the radar system (Taub, 2024). Iran since the attack has not shown signs of retaliation but the war in Gaza is yet to be over which is the fertile ground for continued conflict and a potential for escalation.

Conclusion

Iran- Israel before 1979 were nations that cooperated economically and strategically. The Revolution that overthrew the Palahvi Dynasty, the friendly government in Iran to the West and indeed Israel. This brought a new dimension to their relations. The Periphery Doctrine of maintaining close relations with the region's non-Arab countries to protect itself from hostile Arab neighbours initiated by Israeli Prime Minister Ben Gurion was about to collapse. The rise of Ayatollah Khomeini sealed the fate of their relations.

However, Iraq remained a counterweight to Iran's rising influence. It is the fall of Saddam Hussein that solidified and emboldened the regional pursuit for hegemony of Iran. Its only competitor was Israel. At least, Iran can pursue if not by cultural inclinations, it could by religious persuasions galvanize and rally support from its Arab neighbours to itself and assume hegemony. It has also used the plight of Palestinians to garner support. Coupled with its nuclear ambition and the creation of allies like Hezbollah and Hamas, Israel has viewed this as threat to the existence of its nation. So, both nations are locked in the battle for regional hegemony and supremacy.

The proxy wars between the two nations have resulted in sponsorships of armed militant groups, espionage activities, guerrilla attacks and so on. But 2023-2024 was the height of it where both nations came into direct confrontation with attacks and retaliatory attacks. These actions did not only threaten the peace and stability in the region but also could have drawn the world into the vortex of their conflict.

At a time where international peace and security have become volatile with Russia at war with Ukraine, the escalating nature of the conflict between Iran and Israel could add to the world's security issues with severe economic and human implications.

Diplomatic avenues must be utilized by creating effective supranational agencies to mediate between the two actors. Areas of cooperation should be exploited as they did in pre-Revolutionary Iran.

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