UNITED STATE OF AMERICA–ISRAEL AND IRAN: CAUSES OF CONFLICT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Okolo Abutu Lawrence Ph.D.
Department of History and International Studies, Federal University Gashua, Yobe State.
lauren4all2003@yahoo.com, +2348035726309; +2348022454136
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4003-7962

Babajide Sunday Adedeji
Department of History and International Studies, Federal University Gashua, Yobe State.
Princessadedeji2014@gmail.com

Banwo, Adetoro Olaniyi PhD.
Department of Linguistics, African and Asian Studies, University of Lagos, Akoka-Lagos
abanwo@unilag.edu.ng
ORCID ID https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5440

Haruna Akoji Abel
Department of Public Administration, Ahmadu Bello University Zaria
joekojiabel@gmail.com

DOI: https://doi.org/10.64633/wissj.v10i6.19

Keywords

United States America, Israel, Iran, Conflict, Security, Middle East

Abstract

Research Problem*: This article examines the causes of the conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran and assesses its implications for peace and security in the Middle East. The protracted rivalry among these states has undermined regional stability and security while generating significant consequences for the global economy. Central to the conflict are allegations by the United States and Israel that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons capability through uranium enrichment. In addition, the United States and Israel accuse Iran of providing financial, military, and political support to non-state armed groups, including Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other Iran-aligned militias operating in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, thereby intensifying regional instability.*

Methodology/Theory: *The study adopts a historical research approach and employs qualitative trend analysis to examine relevant historical and contemporary sources. This methodological approach is considered appropriate for investigating the evolution and dynamics of the conflict. The analysis is anchored in Hans Morgenthau's (1948) realist theory, particularly its emphasis on the balance of power as a fundamental*

principle of international relations.
Results: *The findings indicate that the conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran is driven by several interrelated factors, including concerns over Iran's nuclear programme following its signing of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 1968 and ratification in 1970, Iran's expanding regional influence, the collapse of nuclear diplomacy, strategic competition, and broader power politics in the Middle East.*
Conclusion: *The study concludes that although the conflict continues to pose serious challenges to regional peace and security, opportunities for dialogue, negotiation, and diplomatic engagement remain. Despite persistent hostility and mutual distrust, the parties have periodically engaged in communication and negotiations when such engagement aligns with their respective national security and strategic interests.*
Recommendation: *The study recommends that Iran should continue to maintain a civilian nuclear programme dedicated to peaceful purposes, including energy generation, medical applications, and scientific research, while limiting uranium enrichment to levels consistent with internationally agreed peaceful-use standards under effective international verification. Furthermore, all parties should pursue the restoration of diplomatic relations and adopt constructive mechanisms for resolving disputes, including renewed negotiations aimed at restoring mutual compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and strengthening regional confidence-building measures.*

Introduction

The triangular relationship among the United States, Israel, and Iran constitutes one of the most enduring and strategically significant geopolitical rivalries in contemporary international politics. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution transformed Iran from a close ally of the United States into one of its principal adversaries, relations among these three states have been characterized by ideological rivalry, strategic competition, military deterrence, proxy warfare, economic sanctions, and recurring diplomatic crises. Beyond a bilateral confrontation between Israel and Iran, the rivalry has evolved into a broader regional security issue due to the United States' role as Israel's principal strategic ally and security guarantor. Consequently, the interactions among these three actors have become central to understanding the changing security architecture of the Middle East and the prospects for regional peace and stability.

Historically, United States involvement in Iran predates the discovery of oil, beginning with the establishment of diplomatic relations in the nineteenth century. However, American strategic interests expanded significantly during and after the Second World War, particularly following the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran in 1941 and the subsequent consolidation of the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah with American support. The 1953 coup, which restored the Shah after the overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, further deepened United States influence in Iran while simultaneously fuelling anti-American sentiments that culminated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Since then, relations between Iran and the United States have deteriorated considerably, with Israel increasingly viewing

Iran's growing regional influence and nuclear programme as major threats to its national security (Ochim & Hassan-Haruna, 2023; Otubu, Eseoghene, & Sanubi, 2024).

One of the most contentious issues underlying the rivalry is Iran's nuclear programme. International concerns regarding nuclear proliferation led to the establishment of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which seeks to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons while promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy and advancing nuclear disarmament. Complementary institutions such as the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have strengthened international safeguards through verification and monitoring mechanisms (Lander, 2025). Nevertheless, persistent disagreements over Iran's uranium enrichment activities, allegations regarding its nuclear ambitions, and competing security perceptions among the United States, Israel, and Iran have continued to generate diplomatic tensions, economic sanctions, military threats, and periodic confrontations. Despite the existence of international legal frameworks governing nuclear activities, the Iranian nuclear issue remains one of the most significant sources of instability in the Middle East.

Existing studies on the United States–Israel–Iran rivalry have predominantly examined specific dimensions of the conflict, including Iran's nuclear programme, United States sanctions, Israel's security strategy, proxy warfare, or regional alliances. While these studies have generated valuable insights, relatively few provide an integrated analysis that simultaneously examines the historical evolution, strategic motivations, ideological differences, and security implications of the triangular relationship within a single analytical framework. In the same vein, limited attention has been devoted to explaining how the interaction of these factors collectively shapes regional peace and security from the perspective of Realist Theory, which emphasizes national interest, power competition, security dilemmas, and the balance of power. This study addresses these gaps by providing a comprehensive analysis of the drivers of the United States–Israel–Iran conflict and assessing their implications for peace and stability in the Middle East.

The study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the historical evolution of the conflict among the United States, Israel, and Iran.
2. To identify and analyse the political, strategic, ideological, and security factors driving the conflict.
3. To assess the implications of the United States–Israel–Iran rivalry for peace, stability, and security in the Middle East.
4. To explain the conflict using Realist Theory by analysing how national interests, power politics, and the balance of power influence the behaviour of the three states.

This study contributes to existing literature by developing a comprehensive analytical framework that integrates historical, political, strategic, ideological, and security dimensions of the United States–Israel–Iran rivalry. Unlike previous studies that focus primarily on isolated aspects of the conflict, this research demonstrates how these interrelated factors collectively influence regional security dynamics. By applying Realist Theory, the study offers a systematic explanation of state behaviour based on the pursuit of national

interests, power, and survival within an anarchic international system. The findings are expected to enrich scholarly debates on Middle Eastern security while providing useful insights for policymakers and practitioners concerned with conflict management, regional stability, and international peace.

Review of Related Literature on United States-Israel and Iran Conflict

The hostility between Iran and Israel has its roots in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Following the revolution, the newly established Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini rejected Israel's legitimacy, describing it as an occupying state on Palestinian territory and adopting a strong anti-Zionist foreign policy. According to Baltaci (2022), the conflict is driven by a combination of ideological hostility, regional power rivalry, proxy warfare, external power intervention, and competition over strategic resources such as oil. These factors have continued to shape the security architecture of the Middle East and have significantly influenced relations among Iran, Israel, and the United States. Similarly, Shariati and Ghafari (2019) argue that the Islamic Revolution fundamentally altered the balance of power in the Persian Gulf and challenged the existing U.S. security architecture in the region. However, Iran's regional ambitions were temporarily constrained by the Iran-Iraq War and structural limitations within the international system. Following the end of the Cold War, the United States adopted the policy of Dual Containment toward both Iran and Iraq. As explained by Axworthy (2013), this strategy emerged from the U.S. government's conclusion that both countries pursued policies contrary to American interests. Doko (2014) further argues that the objective of this policy was to prevent Iran from emerging as a strategic threat comparable to Iraq during the early 1990s. Nevertheless, Iran later demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with the United States in combating the Taliban after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, indicating that bilateral relations have not been entirely characterized by confrontation.

A dominant argument in the literature concerns Iran's growing regional influence through the use of allied non-state actors and proxy organizations. Barzegar (2016) contends that Iran's regional influence expanded significantly during the twenty-first century, particularly following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab Spring. These developments strengthened Shiite political and military movements and facilitated the emergence of a regional coalition led by Iran. Furthermore, Mossalanejad (2020) argues that the emergence of extremist organizations such as ISIS provided Iran with the opportunity to expand its regional security role through military intervention and support for allied groups such as Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militias. From this perspective, counterterrorism became a central component of Iran's foreign policy. However, this interpretation remains highly contested. The U.S. State Department (2021) continues to designate Iran as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. Likewise, Shakoori and Vazirian (2019), as cited in Otubu, Eseoghene, and Sanubi (2024), note that the United States has designated several Iran-backed organizations—including Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis—as Foreign Terrorist Organizations because they are perceived as undermining American interests while expanding Iranian regional influence. According to these scholars, Iran's "Axis of Resistance," financed largely through oil revenues, has intensified attacks against U.S. forces stationed in Iraq and Syria and targeted commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea since the outbreak of the Gaza conflict. These

developments have increased the risk of direct confrontation despite the apparent reluctance of both Washington and Tehran to engage in full-scale war.

Several scholars examine how successive U.S. administrations have sought to contain Iran's regional ambitions through diplomacy, sanctions, military deterrence, and strategic alliances. Joukar and Sazmand (2020) argue that the U.S. Congress has exercised considerable influence over American policy toward Iran through sanctions legislation, financial assistance to regional allies, and diplomatic initiatives designed to counter Iranian influence. The October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel further reinforced congressional support for Israel and intensified U.S. security commitments in the region. Although U.S. and Israeli officials have accused Iran of supporting Hamas, available evidence has not established direct Iranian government involvement in planning or executing the attack (Pirani & Naderi, 2024; Otubu, Eseoghene, & Sanubi, 2024). Nevertheless, Iran's continued support for militant organizations has contributed to increased military deployments, diplomatic pressure, and expanded economic sanctions by the United States. Pirani and Naderi (2024) further maintain that the United States has relied on a combination of economic sanctions, limited military operations, diplomatic engagement, and strategic partnerships to counter Iranian influence. These measures have been motivated not only by Iran's regional activities but also by concerns over its ballistic missile programme, human rights record, and expanding strategic partnerships with Russia and China.

Another major aspect in the literature is the effectiveness of economic sanctions as a foreign policy instrument. Shariati and Vazirian (2024) argue that although U.S.-led sanctions have imposed severe economic hardships on Iran, they have largely failed to achieve their principal political objectives. Despite prolonged economic pressure, Iran has neither fundamentally altered its regional policies nor abandoned its strategic ambitions. This position is supported by Jones and Portela (2020), who contend that four decades of sanctions have not prevented Iran from expanding its influence across the Middle East. Similarly, Pirani and Naderi (2024) observe that Iran has adapted to sanctions by strengthening economic relations with China through oil exports and expanding military cooperation with Russia, including the export of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). These developments suggest that sanctions have imposed significant economic costs while producing limited strategic success.

The literature also highlights the growing strategic competition among Iran, Israel, and the United States. Pirani and Naderi (2024) argue that Iran has enhanced its regional deterrence through the development of ballistic missile technology and continued support for allied armed groups. These capabilities have increased Iran's strategic influence and complicated U.S. and Israeli security planning. Despite widespread domestic protests in Iran during 2024, the country's regional influence has remained largely intact. Scholars therefore suggest that military modernization, proxy networks, and strategic partnerships with Russia and China have strengthened Iran's capacity to withstand external pressure while maintaining its position as a major regional actor.

Although considerable scholarship exists on U.S. foreign policy, Israeli security strategy, and Iranian regional ambitions, important gaps remain. Most existing studies examine bilateral relationships—such as U.S.–Iran, U.S.–Israel, or Israel–Iran—independently rather than analysing the strategic interaction among all three actors simultaneously. Consequently, relatively few

studies adopt an integrated analytical framework capable of explaining how the actions of one actor shape the strategic calculations and policy responses of the others. Furthermore, while existing literature extensively discusses proxy warfare, military deterrence, nuclear issues, and economic sanctions, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the broader implications of the triangular relationship for regional peacebuilding, collective security, diplomatic conflict management, and long-term political stability. This study seeks to address these gaps by examining the United States–Israel–Iran relationship as an interconnected strategic system and assessing its implications for conflict escalation and prospects for sustainable peace in the Middle East.

Theoretical Framework

Hans Morgenthau's Realist theory, as articulated in Politics Among Nations (1948), provides an appropriate theoretical framework for explaining the persistent conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran. Morgenthau argues that international politics is fundamentally a struggle for power among sovereign states operating in an anarchic international system where no central authority exists to guarantee their security. Consequently, states pursue their national interests primarily through the acquisition, preservation, and projection of power. According to Morgenthau (1948), the balance of power emerges when states seek to prevent any single state from becoming sufficiently powerful to dominate others, thereby preserving their own security and political independence.

The United States' strategic partnership with Israel reflects this realist logic. From a Realist perspective, the United States considers Iran's growing military capabilities, ballistic missile programme, regional alliances, and expanding political influence across the Middle East as potential threats to the existing regional balance of power. Consequently, the United States has employed military deterrence, economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, intelligence cooperation, and strategic alliances with Israel and several Arab partners to constrain Iran's influence. These actions are not primarily motivated by ideological or moral considerations but by the national interest of maintaining American strategic dominance and preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon capable of challenging U.S. influence in the Middle East.

Similarly, Israel's security strategy closely reflects Morgenthau's Realist assumptions. Israel views Iran's nuclear programme, missile development, and support for armed groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and other regional proxy organizations as direct threats to its national survival. Since Realism assumes that states cannot rely on international institutions for their protection, Israel has adopted a policy of military superiority, pre-emptive strikes, intelligence operations, and close security cooperation with the United States. These measures are designed to maintain a favourable balance of power by weakening Iran's strategic capabilities before they become overwhelming.

Iran's foreign and security policies can also be understood through Morgenthau's conception of power politics. Operating in what Realists describe as a self-help international system, Iran has sought to strengthen its military capabilities, expand its missile programme, deepen strategic partnerships with regional allies, and develop networks of proxy forces throughout the Middle East. From Iran's perspective, these policies are defensive measures intended to deter external aggression, preserve regime security, and enhance its regional influence. However, Realism recognises that defensive actions by one state are frequently interpreted as offensive

threats by others, thereby intensifying mutual suspicion and competition.

This interaction illustrates the security dilemma, a central concept within the Realist tradition. Although each actor claims that its military build-up and strategic policies are defensive, these actions are perceived by rivals as preparations for aggression. Iran's expansion of missile capabilities and regional alliances is viewed by the United States and Israel as evidence of expansionist ambitions, while American military deployments, economic sanctions, and Israeli military operations are interpreted by Iran as attempts at containment and regime change. The result is a continuous cycle of military competition, deterrence, counter-deterrence, sanctions, proxy conflicts, and periodic military confrontations.

Furthermore, Morgenthau argues that alliances are temporary instruments for advancing national interests rather than permanent friendships. The enduring strategic alliance between the United States and Israel demonstrates this principle, as both states cooperate to balance Iran's increasing regional influence. Likewise, Iran has cultivated strategic partnerships with sympathetic regional actors and major powers to offset American and Israeli military preponderance. These alignments exemplify balance-of-power politics in practice, where states continuously form alliances to prevent rivals from acquiring overwhelming power.

The theory also explains the reliance on deterrence as a major instrument of statecraft. As Morgan (2012), cited in Otubu, Eseoghene and Sanubi (2024), argues, deterrence, diplomacy, intelligence, and military force remain essential tools through which great powers preserve strategic equilibrium. In the United States–Israel–Iran conflict, deterrence is reflected in Iran's missile capabilities and regional proxy network, Israel's pre-emptive military doctrine and intelligence operations, and the United States' military presence, sanctions regime, and security commitments to regional allies. Each actor seeks to discourage aggression by demonstrating sufficient capability to impose unacceptable costs on its adversaries.

Overall, Hans Morgenthau's Realist theory provides a comprehensive explanation of the United States–Israel and Iran conflict. Rather than viewing the conflict primarily through ideological, religious, or normative perspectives, Realism interprets it as a continuous struggle for power, survival, security, and regional influence within an anarchic international system. The military build-up, strategic alliances, deterrence policies, sanctions, intelligence operations, and periodic military confrontations undertaken by all three actors are consistent with Morgenthau's argument that states pursue national interest defined in terms of power while seeking to preserve a favourable balance of power. Therefore, the United States–Israel attacks on Iran, as well as Iran's counter-balancing strategies, can be understood as manifestations of Realist power politics aimed at preventing regional domination and preserving each state's security and strategic interests.

The Implication of the Causes and Reactions of US-Israel and Iran War in the Middle East

Iran's nuclear programme remains one of the most significant drivers of tensions among Iran, the United States, and Israel. While the United States and Israel have consistently portrayed Iran's uranium enrichment activities as evidence of an ambition to acquire nuclear weapons, Iran has maintained that its nuclear programme serves peaceful civilian purposes and falls within its rights under the Treaty on the Non-

Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (Bowen & Brewer, 2022) .This competing interpretation illustrates that the nuclear issue is not merely a technical question of non-proliferation but a broader geopolitical struggle over regional power, strategic influence, and security perceptions.

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented a major diplomatic breakthrough by placing significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief. Many analysts argued that the agreement substantially delayed Iran's potential nuclear weapons capability while creating mechanisms for international monitoring. Nevertheless, critics maintained that the agreement inadequately addressed Iran's ballistic missile programme and its broader regional security policies. The United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA fundamentally altered the strategic environment. Rather than eliminating Iran's nuclear ambitions, the withdrawal weakened mutual trust, reduced diplomatic incentives for compliance, and encouraged Tehran to resume higher levels of uranium enrichment. Consequently, the collapse of the agreement arguably produced the very security dilemma it sought to prevent. (Zeidan, 2026).From a critical perspective, this study contends that the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA constituted a strategic miscalculation. Instead of strengthening regional security, it intensified mutual suspicion and accelerated the deterioration of diplomatic relations. Economic sanctions and military pressure failed to compel Iran to abandon its nuclear programme; instead, they reinforced Iranian perceptions that nuclear capability constitutes an essential deterrent against external intervention. This finding challenges the assumption that coercive diplomacy alone can effectively resolve deeply rooted security disputes.

Iran's enrichment activities between 2019 and 2023 further heightened international concern, with estimates suggesting that its nuclear breakout time had fallen dramatically. However, equating technical nuclear capability with an immediate intention to manufacture nuclear weapons oversimplifies a far more complex strategic reality. Possessing enriched uranium does not automatically translate into weaponization, and the political decision to develop nuclear weapons involves significant domestic, regional, and international calculations (Zeidan, 2026). Therefore, the persistence of military confrontation despite uncertainty regarding Iran's intentions demonstrates that perceptions of threat often shape foreign policy as much as objective evidence.

Loft (2026) argues that the joint United States–Israel military operations against Iranian nuclear facilities in 2025, followed by statements in 2026 claiming that Iran's nuclear infrastructure had been "totally obliterated," further illustrate the limitations of military solutions. Despite these claims, the inability of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to resume inspections and verify the location of Iran's enriched uranium suggests that military strikes may have disrupted but did not conclusively eliminate Iran's nuclear capabilities. This study argues that military force can delay nuclear development but is unlikely to eradicate the technological knowledge, scientific expertise, and political determination that sustain a nuclear programme. Consequently, military action appears to have produced tactical success without achieving strategic resolution.

Iran's military response, justified by Tehran as an exercise of its inherent right to self-

defence under Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, significantly widened the conflict. Its attacks on Israel, United States military installations, and strategic regional targets transformed a bilateral confrontation into a broader regional security crisis. At the same time, the divergent responses of Arab Gulf states reveal the complexity of Middle Eastern geopolitics (Loft, 2026). Although these states condemned Iran's military actions, several simultaneously criticized the United States and Israel for initiating military operations. This apparent contradiction reflects a pragmatic balancing strategy rather than ideological inconsistency. Gulf governments seek simultaneously to preserve their strategic partnerships with Washington while avoiding a regional war that would threaten their own economic and security interests.

This study interprets these responses as evidence that Middle Eastern states increasingly reject rigid alliance politics in favour of flexible diplomacy based on national interests. The reactions of Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates demonstrate that contemporary regional diplomacy is driven less by permanent alliances than by strategic calculations aimed at preventing regional instability. Such behaviour supports realist assumptions regarding state survival while simultaneously illustrating that diplomacy remains indispensable even within an intensely competitive security environment.

Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz represented one of the conflict's most significant geopolitical consequences. The disruption of one of the world's most critical maritime energy corridors exposed the vulnerability of the global economy to regional conflicts. The subsequent United States counter-blockade and the coordinated release of strategic petroleum reserves by members of the International Energy Agency demonstrated that modern military conflicts extend beyond conventional warfare into economic competition and energy security. This study argues that control over strategic economic infrastructure has become as influential as conventional military superiority in determining the outcome of contemporary interstate conflicts.

The legal controversy surrounding the United States' military strikes further complicates the conflict. Iran rejected the attacks as violations of its sovereignty and territorial integrity, arguing before the United Nations Security Council that the strikes constituted unlawful uses of force against peaceful nuclear facilities. Conversely, the United States justified its actions on grounds of regional security and the prevention of nuclear proliferation. Rather than presenting a definitive legal judgment (United Nations Security Council, 2025). this study observes that international law has increasingly become subject to competing political interpretations, particularly when major powers invoke self-defence or preventive security. The inability of international institutions to reconcile these competing claims exposes significant weaknesses in the contemporary collective security system.

Equally significant are the domestic political implications within the United States. The sharp partisan divisions in Congress regarding the legality and necessity of military action against Iran demonstrate that decisions on the use of force are increasingly shaped by domestic political polarization rather than bipartisan strategic consensus. Although constitutional debates regarding presidential war powers have accompanied numerous United States military interventions, repeated executive reliance on unilateral military action has gradually expanded presidential authority while reducing effective congressional oversight (United Nations

Security Council, 2025). This institutional evolution raises important questions regarding democratic accountability in foreign policy decision-making.

Overall, this study argues that the United States–Israel–Iran conflict cannot be adequately explained solely through the lens of nuclear proliferation. Rather, the nuclear issue functions as one dimension of a broader geopolitical contest involving regional dominance, deterrence, alliance politics, ideological rivalry, energy security, and great-power competition. Military force has succeeded in generating temporary tactical advantages but has consistently failed to resolve the underlying strategic causes of the conflict. Lasting regional stability therefore depends less on coercive military strategies than on rebuilding credible diplomatic mechanisms capable of addressing the legitimate security concerns of all parties. Without such a comprehensive approach, cycles of retaliation are likely to persist, increasing the probability of wider regional instability and further undermining the effectiveness of the international non-proliferation regime.

Conclusion

This study examined the causes of the conflict among the United States, Israel, and Iran and assessed their implications for peace and security in the Middle East through the lens of Realist Theory. The findings demonstrate that the conflict is driven by a combination of strategic, political, ideological, and security factors rather than by Iran's nuclear programme alone. While concerns over uranium enrichment and nuclear proliferation remain important, they interact with broader issues, including regional power competition, alliance politics, proxy conflicts, economic sanctions, and the pursuit of national interests. The evidence further indicates that these dynamics have contributed to persistent regional instability, increased militarization, humanitarian suffering, disruptions in global energy markets, and heightened uncertainty within the international system.

Conceptually, this study contributes to the literature by demonstrating that the United States–Israel–Iran rivalry is better understood as a multidimensional security competition than as a single-issue nuclear dispute. The findings reinforce the core assumptions of Realist Theory that states primarily pursue survival, security, and relative power in an anarchic international system. However, the study also extends existing realist explanations by showing that contemporary balance-of-power politics in the Middle East increasingly combines military capabilities with economic sanctions, diplomatic pressure, technological competition, intelligence cooperation, and proxy warfare. Consequently, balancing behaviour in the region is no longer confined to conventional military deterrence but encompasses multiple instruments of statecraft.

The findings both support and differ from previous studies. Consistent with earlier scholarship, the study confirms that strategic rivalry, security dilemmas, and competing geopolitical interests remain central drivers of the conflict. However, unlike studies that primarily attribute regional instability to Iran's nuclear ambitions, this research finds that the persistence of the conflict results from the interaction of nuclear concerns with long-standing ideological antagonism, regional influence, alliance commitments, and mutual threat perceptions. Furthermore, while previous studies often portray economic sanctions as an effective coercive instrument, the findings suggest that sanctions generate mixed outcomes by imposing substantial economic costs on Iran while also creating unintended consequences for sanctioning states, global markets, and third-

party actors. These findings therefore challenge simplistic assumptions regarding the effectiveness of sanctions as a stand-alone foreign policy tool.

The study distinguishes between empirical observations and interpretive analysis. Empirically, the evidence indicates that repeated sanctions, military confrontations, proxy conflicts, and diplomatic deadlock have failed to produce durable regional stability. Interpretively, the study argues that the continued reliance on coercive strategies has reinforced mutual distrust and prolonged the security dilemma among the three states. From this perspective, sustainable peace is unlikely to emerge through military superiority alone but requires credible diplomatic engagement alongside effective security guarantees.

The study has several strengths. By integrating historical analysis with Realist Theory, it provides a comprehensive explanation of the conflict that connects empirical developments with international relations theory. Its comparative examination of the strategic behaviour of the United States, Israel, and Iran also offers a broader analytical perspective than approaches that focus exclusively on one actor or one dimension of the conflict. This interdisciplinary approach enhances the explanatory value of the findings and contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on security competition, balance-of-power politics, and conflict management in the Middle East.

The policy implications are equally significant. First, renewed diplomatic engagement should complement deterrence strategies to reduce the risk of further military escalation. Second, all parties should pursue verifiable confidence-building measures, including sustained dialogue on nuclear activities, regional security arrangements, and crisis communication mechanisms. Third, the United States, Israel, and Iran should support multilateral diplomatic initiatives that encourage compliance with international agreements and reduce incentives for proxy conflicts. Fourth, sanctions should be periodically reviewed to ensure that they achieve clearly defined political objectives while minimizing adverse humanitarian and economic consequences. Finally, regional organizations and major international stakeholders should strengthen cooperative security frameworks capable of addressing both conventional and non-conventional security threats.

Overall, this study concludes that enduring peace in the Middle East will depend not on the absolute dominance of any single state but on the successful integration of strategic deterrence, sustained diplomacy, mutual confidence-building, and inclusive regional security cooperation. The findings therefore contribute both theoretically and empirically to understanding the evolving nature of balance-of-power politics and offer practical policy insights for reducing tensions among the United States, Israel, and Iran.

References

Akram, S. M., Dunne, C. W., Hawthorne, A., Karam, P., Khalil, E., Sheline, A., & Coates Ulrichsen, K. (2006). The U.S.-Israel war on Iran: Analyses and perspectives. Arab Center Washington DC. https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-us-israel-war-on-iran-analyses-and-perspectives/

Axworthy, M. (2013). Revolutionary Iran: A history of the Islamic Republic. Oxford University Press.

Baltaci, A. (2022). Iran-Israel conflict: An overview of the situation after the Iranian

Islamic Revolution from the framework of security theories. International Social Sciences Studies Journal, 8(100), 1–3.

Barzegar, K. (2016). The Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East.Center for International Research and Education.

Bowen, W. Q., & Brewer, J. (2022). Iran's nuclear challenge: Politics and proliferation in the Middle East. Routledge.

Dokos, T. (2014). Iran's nuclear propensity: The probability of nuclear use. EU Non-Proliferation Consortium.

Joukar, M., & Sazmand, B. (2020). The role of regional powers in shaping the Middle East security order (2003–2011). Geo-Politics Quarterly, 16(59), 148–171.

Jonathan, T. (2025). What to know about the nuclear treaty that Iran's threatening to quit. Bloomberg. https://www.bloomberg.com/

Landler, M. (2025). Iran's nuclear dreams may survive even a devastating American blow. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/

Loft, P. (2026, April 24). Israel/US-Iran conflict 2026: Background and UK response. House of Commons Library.https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-10521/CBP-10521.pdf

Morgenthau, H. J. (1967). Politics among nations: The struggle for power and peace (4th ed.). Alfred A. Knopf.

Otubu, A., Efebeh, V. E., & Sanubi, F. A. (2024).United States-Iran conflict and its security implications for the Middle East. Malikussaleh Social & Political Reviews,
5(1). https://doi.org/10.29103/mspr.v5i1.16528

Pirani, S., & Naderi, M. (2024). The causes of ineffectiveness of U.S. sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran based on the political, economic and geopolitical components. Geopolitics Quarterly, 19(4), 314–
337. https://doi.org/10.22034/igq.2023.185746

Shariati, S., & Ghaffari, M. (2019). The Iran-Iraq War: Geopolitical economy of the conflict. Geopolitics Quarterly, 14(52), 46–61.

Shariati, S., & Vazirian, A. H. (2024).Counterterrorism in Middle Eastern foreign policy of Iran (1971–2021). Geopolitics Quarterly, 19(4), 246–267.

Sun, M. (2013, February 12). Balance of power theory in today's international system.E-International Relations. https://www.e-ir.info/2014/02/12/balance-of-power-theory-in-todays-international-system/

United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs.(n.d.). Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). https://www.un.org/disarmament/wmd/nuclear/npt/

United Nations Security Council.(2025). Letter from Iran to the United Nations Security Council (S/2025/417). https://docs.un.org/en/S/2025/417

U.S. Department of State. (2021). Country reports on terrorism 2021: Iran. https://2021-2025.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2021/iran/

Vitale, E. (2026). What role does Congress play in the U.S.'s war with Iran? American University. https://www.american.edu/sis/news/20260309-what-role-does-congress-play-in-us-war-with-iran.cfm

Waltz, K. N. (1959). Man, the state, and war: A theoretical analysis. Columbia University Press.

Waltz, K. N. (1979). Theory of international politics.McGraw-Hill.

Yange, E., & Erighe, U. W. (2025). Iran/Israel war and its impact on Nigeria's strategic interest. Kwararafa Security Review, 3(4), 281–
295. https://doi.org/10.64633/ksr.v3.i4.20

Zeidan, A. (2026). 2026 Iran war.Encyclopaedia Britannica.https://www.britannica.com/event/2026-Iran-