

The Escalation of the Iran–Israel Conflict and Its Implications for Middle East Geopolitical Stability

Tri Adianto¹, Moh. Dulkiah²

¹Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati
Bandung

*corresponding author E-mail: tri.adianto3595@gmail.com

²Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Islam Negeri Sunan Gunung Djati
Bandung

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ABSTRACT

The Iran–Israel conflict stands as one of the most critical and enduring issues shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Rooted in ideological antagonism and mutual perceptions of existential threat, this rivalry has evolved into a multidimensional confrontation involving military, political, and proxy dynamics. This study aims to analyze the root causes of the conflict, trace its historical escalation, and assess its implications for regional stability. Using a qualitative approach, data were obtained through a systematic literature review of scholarly journals, policy documents, and verified international reports. The collected materials were analyzed using content analysis to interpret the geopolitical and sociological dimensions of the conflict. The findings reveal that the conflict has progressed through six major phases, from proxy warfare to open military confrontation in 2025, which has triggering intensified militarization, shifting regional alliances, and heightened involvement of major powers. The conflict has induced at least five significant implication to the region, i.e: destabilization of the regional security architecture, acceleration of arms race and regional militarization, reconfiguration of regional alliances and the rise of new blocs, disruption of global trade and energy security, and intensification of refugee flows and humanitarian crises. The research concludes that regional stability requires a renewed multilateral mechanism emphasizing preventive diplomacy, confidence-building, and cooperative security. Establishing a permanent Middle Eastern Security Forum under the coordination of the United Nations and regional organizations is recommended as a long-term solution to manage the Iran–Israel rivalry and prevent further escalation that could endanger global peace and economic stability.

Keywords: *Conflict, Geopolitical Stability, Iran, Israel, The Middle East*

INTRODUCTION

The Iran–Israel conflict represents one of the most critical strategic issues in Middle East geopolitics. This long-standing rivalry, spanning over four decades, has been driven by ideological tensions, military competition, and a struggle for strategic influence in the region. Since the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, bilateral relations have severely deteriorated, triggered by Iran’s dramatic political shift and its categorical rejection of Israel’s existence. These tensions have steadily escalated, particularly in relation to the development of Iran’s nuclear program and Israel’s military operations across the region.

The most recent escalation occurred on June 13, 2025, when Israel launched a large-scale military operation known as “Operation Rising Lion” in response to alleged nuclear activity and strategic threats from Iran (Lam, 2025). The operation targeted Iran’s uranium enrichment facility located in Natanz, several military installations, and key figures involved in the country’s nuclear weapons development program, resulting in the deaths of several military commanders and six nuclear scientists (Parry, 2025). In retaliation, Iran initiated “Operation True Promise III”, firing hundreds of missiles and drones at Israeli territory, including Tel Aviv and the Kirya military complex (Aljazeera, 2025). Although the conflict lasted only 12 days and concluded with a ceasefire, its intensity demonstrated an unprecedented level of escalation.

This episode underscores that the Iran-Israel conflict is not an isolated event, but as a result of the culmination of long-standing geopolitical dynamics. The main tensions lies in Israel’s perception of Iran’s nuclear program as an existential threat. Conversely, Iran has repeatedly asserted that its nuclear programs are peaceful, as stated in numerous international forums and supported by reports indicating no active pursuit of nuclear weapons (Salem, 2025). This tension exemplifies what Pruitt and Rubin (2009) define as a perception-based conflict of interest, in which the parties involved believe

their respective goals are fundamentally irreconcilable.

The consequences of this open conflict extend beyond the immediate actors, posing broader implications for the stability of the Middle East. Based on the standpoint of classical geopolitics, Ratzel (2018) describes 'the state' as a living entity striving to expand its sphere of influence (*lebensraum*) to ensure its survival. In this context, the Iran-Israel conflict can be interpreted as a contest over strategic space, both militarily and ideologically. This view aligns with Buzan and Waever's (2003) Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), which posits that the security of a state within a region is inextricably linked to the security dynamics of neighboring states. Thus, the escalation of this conflict holds the potential to destabilize the broader region and impact global security structures.

Despite the vast literature addressing Middle East conflicts, only a few studies have systematically examined how regional proxy wars intersect with global geopolitical escalation through the prism of the Iran-Israel rivalry. Existing research often analyze the general factors that cause the conflict, such as research by Ilham (2019) highlights that geopolitical factors play a significant role in driving the conflict toward open confrontation. The Middle East's strategic location as a global energy hub makes it a focal point for power struggles among states. Within this context, Iran and Israel appear to adopt a hard balancing of power strategy, characterized by direct military buildup aimed at achieving strategic parity and maintaining regional dominance. Another study by Nisa (2025) emphasizes that prolonged tensions between the two nations may lead to a regional arms race, increased defense spending, and heightened involvement of external actors who vest strategic interests in the region.

This article seeks to bridge that analytical gap by offering a comprehensive examination of the Iran-Israel conflict through an integrated geopolitical perspective. By situating the conflict within this multidimensional setting, the study endeavors to illuminate how proxy confrontations between

Iran and Israel are not merely regional phenomena, but also reflections of shifting global alignments and power transitions. Specifically, this research investigates the underlying causes, the historical timeline of escalation, and the implications for geopolitical stability. Based on this framework, the article addresses the central research question: “How does the escalation of the Iran–Israel conflict affect geopolitical stability in the Middle East?”. Conceptually, this study contributes to the broader discourse on regional security and international relations by demonstrating how localized hostilities can evolve into catalysts for systemic geopolitical transformation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to gain an in-depth and contextual understanding of the Iran–Israel conflict within its geopolitical and historical dimensions. As Creswell (2019) notes, a qualitative approach emphasizes the exploration of meaning, processes, and deep understanding of a phenomenon within its natural context. This approach was selected because it enables researchers to interpret the multifaceted socio-political realities underlying the conflict, ranging from its root causes and escalation timeline to its implications for regional stability and the involvement of global powers.

Data were collected through a systematic literature review, which serves as the principal method of qualitative data acquisition. According to Zed (2014), a systematic literature review entails the comprehensive examination of academic journals, books, policy reports, and verified media sources relevant to the research focus. This method is particularly appropriate for political and international studies in which direct observation of events is impossible. The data sources utilized in this article include peer-reviewed journal articles, reports from international institutions, verified media publications, and official documents related to the Iran–Israel conflict. We used these sources to construct a comprehensive understanding of the conflict’s development over time and to analyze its impact on the political

configuration of the region. Data were retrieved from academic databases encompassing both national and international journals. In addition, several institutional reports and credible media publications such as BBC, CNN, and Al Jazeera, accessed through international academic databases to ensure both relevance and validity.

The collected data were then analyzed using content analysis, which Krippendorff (2019) defines as a systematic and replicable technique for drawing valid inferences from texts within their contextual meaning. This technique enables the identification of key patterns, themes, and geopolitical narratives reflected across various sources. To strengthen the validity and credibility of the findings, this study employed a methodological triangulation process appropriate for qualitative literature-based research (Flick, 2018). Triangulation was achieved through three complementary strategies: 1) Data triangulation, by comparing evidence from multiple types of sources (academic journals, think-tank reports, and verified international media); 2) Theoretical triangulation, by interpreting findings through multiple analytical lenses; and 3) Investigator triangulation, by cross-validating interpretations through consultations with existing peer-reviewed works to enhance interpretive reliability. Through these triangulation techniques, the study ensures the robustness, transparency, and trustworthiness of its analytical conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Main Cause of Iran-Israel Conflict

Historically, Iran and Israel maintained cordial and cooperative relations, particularly during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The two countries formed bilateral cooperation across various sectors, including oil and energy, military and intelligence collaboration, as well as agricultural and water technologies (Menashri & Parsi, 2016). However, this relationship changed drastically following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. The rise of

the Islamic Republic brought a radical shift in Iran's foreign policy, replacing diplomatic engagement with ideological opposition. Following the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini openly declared Israel an enemy toward Israel, referring to it as an "illegitimate regime", an "occupier", an "enemy of Islam", and "the little Satan." He shut down the Israeli embassy in Tehran and handed over its premises to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in February 1979 (Shoba, 2025).

Since then, the Islamic Republic of Iran has actively supported liberation movements such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine as part of its resistance against the existence of Israel. Iran also established the so-called "Axis of Resistance" as an expression of its anti-Zionist ideology and an aggressive regional strategy (Tait, 2025). The Axis of Resistance is an informal alliance between Iran and various groups and states in the Middle East that oppose the influence of the United States, Israel, and their allies, particularly in the Levant and the Persian Gulf. Iran serves as the ideological nucleus of this alliance, providing military, intelligence, and logistical support. Its members include Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Assad regime in Syria, Hamas in Gaza, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthi movement in Yemen, and various Shia militias in Iraq (Soltaninejad, 2018).

On the surface, ideology does indeed appear to be a primary source of conflict between Iran and Israel, especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The regime change, from a pro-Western monarchy under Shah Reza Pahlavi to an Islamic Republic led by Ayatollah Khomeini, marked a pivotal shift in bilateral relations. Post-revolutionary, Iran officially adopted a hardline anti-Zionist stance, viewing Israel not merely as an occupying state but also as the ideological enemy. This aligns with the findings of Roomi (2023), who explains that the Iran-Israel conflict is rooted in ultra-ideological antagonism, with Iran positioning itself as the vanguard of resistance against Zionist and Western hegemony in the Middle East. Further, Nisa (2025) notes that the ideological dimension plays a central role in shaping Iran's foreign policy toward Israel,

where hostility is not merely symbolic but is manifested in concrete support for resistance groups across Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. Therefore, the Iran–Israel conflict should not be viewed solely as a conventional geopolitical rivalry but rather as an ideologically driven confrontation deeply embedded in the post-revolutionary political identity of both nations.

Nevertheless, Upon deeper examination, one finds that the root of the conflict lies in the perception of “existential threat”. Israel has consistently viewed Iran’s nuclear program as a serious potential danger to its survival. This concern is reinforced by repeated public statements from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, such as the one delivered in an official Israeli radio broadcast:

“The Iranian threat is an existential one. In this regard I will continue the legacy of Menachem Begin, who thwarted Iran's neighbour, Iraq, from acquiring nuclear weapons by adopting bold and daring measures. I believe that is what Israel needs to do.” (McGreal, 2006)

Netanyahu also issued a stark warning in an official video released shortly before Israel's airstrike on Iran on June 13, 2025. In his statement, he emphasized:

“If not stopped, Iran could produce a nuclear weapon in a very short time. This is a clear and present danger to Israel's very survival.” (McEntyre, 2025).

From these various official statements, it is evident that for Israel, Iran’s nuclear program is not merely perceived as a potential threat but as a tangible and immediate danger that could obliterate its existence as a nation-state. This perception has driven Israel to adopt an aggressive preemptive strategy, framed as a form of national defense against what is regarded as the most fundamental threat in its modern history.

Conversely, Iran firmly views Israel as an enemy of Islam that ‘must be wiped off the map’, in alignment with its ideologically driven anti-Zionist foreign policy. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in his post-1979 Islamic

Revolution political rhetoric, notoriously referred to Israel as the “Little Satan”. Khomeini consistently emphasized the necessity of resisting the existence of the Zionist state and expressed unwavering support, both material and military, for resistance movements willing to oppose Israel. Furthermore, Iran’s current Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, reiterated this position during a series of speeches marking Quds Day in 2020. In one of his public addresses, Khamenei stated:

“The Zionist regime (Israel) is a deadly, cancerous tumor in the region. It will undoubtedly be uprooted and destroyed.” (Hazefi, 2020)

This statement underscores the continuation of Iran’s ideological stance from the Khomeini era to the present, reinforcing its commitment to the elimination of the Israeli state as a core component of its regional policy narrative.

On another occasion, Khamenei stated:

“Definitely, the Zionist regime is the source of corruption, war, and rifts. The Zionist regime that is a lethal, dangerous, cancerous tumor should certainly be eradicated, and it will be.” (The Times of Israel, 2025)

This statement was delivered in response to U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2025. Khamenei’s official declarations reinforce the state’s rhetoric that portrays Israel as an entity that must be eliminated in pursuit of its ideological and geopolitical vision.

In reaction to what it perceives as an existential threat from Iran, Israel has not only undertaken preemptive military actions but is also believed to have supported discourse on regime change in Tehran. This includes subtle support for Reza Pahlavi, the son of Iran’s last Shah, as a potential post-regime figurehead. Although never officially acknowledged by the Israeli government, several analysts argue that Operation Rising Lion, launched by Israel in June 2025, carries symbolic significance closely associated with the monarchical emblem of Iran, the clawed lion. This symbolism is interpreted as a sign of support for the agenda of restoring the monarchy, which was overthrown by the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Some Israeli circles even view regime change in

Iran as a long-term strategic pathway toward establishing a new regional security order, relying on figures from the Iranian diaspora including Pahlavi, who is perceived as pro-Western and aligned with Tel Aviv's geopolitical interests (The Times, 2025).

This hypothesis gained further credibility when Reza Pahlavi publicly endorsed Israel's attack on Iran on June 13, 2025. His public statement was widely seen as both a personal political move and a form of collaboration with Israel (Nashed, 2025). This narrative is further supported by evidence suggesting that many Israeli strikes were aimed at eliminating Iranian strategic leaders, including an attempted assassination of the Iranian current President during the 12-day conflict. Although the assassination attempt failed, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian was reportedly lightly injured in the leg after being targeted by an Israeli missile during a session of the Supreme National Security Council in Tehran on June 15, 2025 (Taherkenareh, 2025).

These developments indicate that the main cause of the Iran–Israel conflict extends far beyond mere ideological differences. At its core is the issue of “existential threat”. Israel believes that Iran's nuclear program and its consistent anti-Israel policy are direct existential threats to the Jewish state's survival. This has prompted Israel to adopt a preemptive security policy and to maintain military superiority in the region. Conversely, Iran perceives Israel's sustained military and diplomatic pressure as an attempt to delegitimize and ultimately dismantle the Islamic regime that has governed since the 1979 Revolution. Thus, the conflict has evolved into an existential rivalry between two political entities seeking to maintain their own political systems, ideological foundations, and national sovereignty.

The Chronological Timeline of the Iran–Israel Conflict Escalation

Phase I: Strategic Relations under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (1948–1979)

Prior to the Islamic Revolution in Iran, relations between Iran and Israel were relatively harmonious despite the two countries' differing

ideological backgrounds. Upon Israel's declaration of independence in 1948, Iran became the second Muslim-majority country to recognize Israel *de facto* (Maher, 2020). During the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran established diplomatic ties and strategic cooperation with Israel, particularly in the areas of energy, agriculture, intelligence, and military affairs. One of the most notable collaborations was the construction of the 254-kilometer Eilat–Ashkelon oil pipeline in the late 1960s, which enabled the transportation of Iranian oil from the Persian Gulf to Europe via the Mediterranean. Israeli engineers also participated in the modernization of agricultural infrastructure in Qazvin, Iran (Azizi, 2024).

The most clandestine yet substantial cooperation between the two nations was Project Flower (1977–1979), a joint initiative to develop a submarine-launched anti-ship missile based on the Gabriel missile system. Iran financed the majority of the project with oil shipments valued at hundreds of millions of dollars. The project included the construction of a missile assembly facility in Sirjan and a testing site in Rafsanjan. This partnership was underpinned by Iran's status as a key Western ally during the Cold War, which made Israel a natural strategic partner in countering Soviet influence and Arab nationalist movements (Mack, 2019).

Phase II: Ideological Hostility in the Post-Revolution Era (1979–1989)

Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran abruptly severed diplomatic relations with Israel. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the newly established Islamic Republic, immediately adopted a firmly anti-Israel foreign policy. On February 18, 1979, the Israeli embassy in Tehran was officially closed by the new regime and handed over to the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), symbolizing Iran's solidarity with the Palestinian cause (Ilham, 2019). This act marked the complete withdrawal of formal recognition of Israel and demonstrated Iran's ideological commitment to supporting Palestinian resistance.

During this decade, Iran also began forming and supporting militant

groups as part of its emerging regional strategy. This effort intensified following Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In response, Iran deployed approximately 1,000 to 1,500 members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to the Beqaa Valley with Syrian consent to organize and train Shia militias, eventually giving rise to Hezbollah. Hezbollah would become Iran's first and most prominent proxy force in confronting Israel in Lebanon. Iran also provided Hezbollah with an estimated annual budget of USD 140 million and supported its social services, welfare systems, and financial incentives for members and loyalists (Al-Aloosy, 2023).

Phase III: Expansion of Proxy Warfare (1990–2010)

In the 1990s, the Iran–Israel conflict began to transform from ideological hostility into indirect confrontation through proxy actors. Iran systematically expanded its influence in the region, primarily by supporting armed groups that were ideologically and politically aligned, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. This strategy became the backbone of Iran's regional security policy, known as the 'forward defense doctrine', whereby Iran sought to confront threats far from its national borders to prevent domestic conflicts (Yossef, 2019).

Hezbollah's role in the conflict constellation grew increasingly prominent after successfully conducting various attacks against Israeli forces in southern Lebanon. The peak occurred in 2006 during the 34-day war between Israel and Hezbollah, triggered by the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers. During this conflict, Iran openly supported Hezbollah with logistics, training, and military support. Despite Israel's heavy air and artillery bombardment of Lebanon, Hezbollah managed to withstand and maintain its positions. This conflict solidified Hezbollah as the most effective non-state actor confronting Israel and reinforced Iran's position as the primary sponsor of anti-Zionist resistance movements in the Levant (Estriani, 2023). In addition to Hezbollah, Iran began cultivating strategic ties with Hamas, particularly after the group won the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006.

Iran's support for Hamas marked more overt involvement in the Palestine–Israel conflict. In this context, Iran not only played a symbolic role as a defender of Palestine but also provided material resources to bolster Hamas's military capacity in Gaza (AlMadani, 2018).

On the other hand, Israel responded by enhancing intelligence operations, counterterrorism measures, and defense cooperation with Sunni Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan. Israel also developed doctrines to counter indirect or asymmetric threats posed by Iran-backed groups. Regional tensions became increasingly complex, as the conflict transcended formal state boundaries and involved militias, armed factions, psychological warfare via media, and propaganda (Eilam, 2022). Overall, this period was characterized by the consolidation of Iran-led proxy power, with the Iran–Israel conflict evolving into a highly dynamic proxy warfare. Escalation did not occur through direct state-to-state confrontation but took the form of short-term wars, sabotage, and limited continuous clashes. This strategy enabled both parties to exert pressure on each other while avoiding direct confrontations that could trigger wider international escalation.

Phase IV: The Nuclear Crisis and Western Intervention (2002–2015)

This phase marked a major shift in the Iran–Israel conflict, from proxy warfare toward diplomatic confrontation and strategic threats related to nuclear proliferation. It began in August 2002, when the Iranian opposition in exile, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), revealed the existence of two secret nuclear facilities in Natanz (uranium enrichment) and Arak (heavy water reactor), which had not been previously reported to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This disclosure sparked global concerns about the possible militarization of Iran's nuclear program and opened a new chapter in international pressure on Tehran. In response, Iran agreed to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment in 2003 and engage in negotiations with three European countries (the United Kingdom, France, and Germany) (Germani & Goldschmidt, 2012).

However, the election of hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 stalled the talks. Iran openly resumed uranium enrichment and rejected multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions demanding the cessation of its nuclear program. The year 2006 became a critical turning point when Iran announced it had enriched uranium up to 3.5%, accompanied by the construction of hundreds of centrifuges at the underground Natanz facility. The UN Security Council responded with several key resolutions: Resolution 1696 (July 2006) demanding that Iran halt uranium enrichment, and Resolution 1737 (December 2006) imposing sanctions on individuals and entities linked to Iran's nuclear program. Iran refused to comply and continued its nuclear activities, heightening tensions with Israel, which viewed these developments as an existential threat (Iranwatch.org, 2023).

Tensions escalated further in 2010 when a massive cyberattack targeted Iran's nuclear infrastructure using the Stuxnet virus. This attack, allegedly a joint intelligence operation by the United States and Israel, damaged thousands of centrifuges and significantly delayed Iran's uranium enrichment program. Stuxnet marked a historic milestone in the use of cyberwarfare against strategic facilities and reflected the increasing complexity of the Iran-Israel conflict arena (Denning, 2012).

In 2013, diplomatic breakthroughs emerged with the election of a more moderate president, Hassan Rouhani. Iran resumed nuclear negotiations, culminating in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. The JCPOA was signed by Iran along with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, and endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 2231. Under the agreement, Iran committed to limiting uranium enrichment to a maximum of 3.67%, reducing the number of active centrifuges, and granting the IAEA full access for inspections. In return, international economic sanctions on Iran were gradually lifted (Rousahn, 2022). While welcomed by parts of the international community, Israel openly rejected the JCPOA. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu viewed the

deal as too weak, providing a “legal pathway” for Iran to become a nuclear state in the long term. Israel accused Iran of clandestinely continuing enrichment activities and exploiting sanctions relief to strengthen its military and fund proxy groups such as Hezbollah. This strong opposition highlighted that for Israel, the Iranian nuclear crisis was not merely a technical issue but a direct threat to state survival and regional security (Youvan, 2024). This phase was characterized by heightened multilateral diplomacy, the use of cyber technology in warfare, and intense involvement of major world powers in the Iran–Israel conflict. Despite a formal de-escalation of direct military confrontations, latent threats from Iran’s nuclear program remained a strategic concern for Israel and its allies in the region.

Phase V: Diplomatic Breakdown and Renewed Tensions (2018–2022)

Following the conclusion of the JCPOA in 2015, the international community initially hoped for a de-escalation of the Iran–Israel conflict through diplomatic approaches and international oversight. However, those hopes began to unravel when, in May 2018, the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA and reimposed economic sanctions under the policy of “maximum pressure” on Iran (Mikail, 2018). The U.S. withdrawal directly undermined the diplomatic foundations previously established and prompted Iran to gradually cease its commitments under the agreement.

In early 2021, Iran began uranium enrichment beyond JCPOA limits, reaching 20%, and even escalating to 60% enrichment at the underground Natanz facility by April. According to IAEA reports, Iran also started operating advanced centrifuges such as IR-4 and IR-6, significantly enhancing enrichment capacity. Producing uranium at the 60% level indicated Iran’s technical readiness to approach weapons-grade material if further escalation occurred, although Iran maintained its program was peaceful (Iranwatch.org, 2023). These Iranian actions sparked deep concerns in Israel. For Tel Aviv, Iran’s return to high-level enrichment was not only a JCPOA violation but a

tangible existential threat.

The crisis worsened as Iran subsequently restricted IAEA inspection access to Natanz starting February 2021. Iran's action raised diplomatic tensions while JCPOA renegotiations dragged on without resolution by late 2022. In response, Israel intensified preemptive threat rhetoric and expanded its intelligence activities in the region. During this time, the proxy conflict between the two countries expanded into Syria and Iraq, with Israel conducting dozens of airstrikes against Iranian-backed militias, especially near Damascus and the Iraq-Syria border. Iran responded by bolstering its influence in these areas and strengthening proxy militia networks extending from Lebanon to Yemen.

This phase reflected the fragility of the Middle East security architecture post-JCPOA and demonstrated how diplomatic failures could hasten broader military confrontation. Iran's renewed nuclear enrichment, increased sabotage and targeted assassinations, and proxy war expansion indicated that the Iran-Israel conflict had entered a dangerous high-tension phase difficult to control by conventional means.

Phase VI: From Proxy War to Open Confrontation (2023–2025)

This phase marked the most critical turning point in the history of the Iran-Israel conflict, marking the transformation from indirect confrontation through proxies to an overt and large-scale military engagement. Whereas the preceding four decades were dominated by proxy wars, intelligence operations, and diplomatic pressure, the period since 2023 has been characterized by a transition toward open state-to-state confrontation, as documented in verified media reports, policy analyses, and official statements. This escalation was not a sudden occurrence but the culmination of cumulative provocations that eroded the previously maintained non-confrontational norms between both states. The analysis in this section is based primarily on triangulated data from international media (e.g., BBC, Al Jazeera, CNN), think-tank reports (Institute for the Study of War, International Crisis Group), and

policy documents from regional actors, providing an integrated empirical and discursive perspective on the conflict's evolution.

Escalation began on 7 October 2023, when Hamas launched a large-scale armed assault on southern Israel. This attack ignited prolonged hostilities in the Gaza Strip and intensified tensions between Israel and Iran, given Tehran's consistent material and political support for Hamas within the framework of the "Axis of Resistance". Although Iran did not directly participate, empirical reports from multiple intelligence assessments cited by the BBC and the Washington Post indicated that Iranian actors provided strategic training and weapons transfers, leading Israel to accuse Tehran of being the primary logistical backer of the operation.

The situation deteriorated further on 1 April 2024. Israel launched an airstrike on the Iranian consulate complex in Damascus, killing Mohammad Reza Zahedi, a senior Quds Force general of the IRGC. This strike, viewed as a violation of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, elicited strong condemnation from Iran and sparked protests across many Muslim-majority countries. Analysts considered this attack a game changer in Iran-Israel relations, as it represented direct aggression against an official diplomatic facility rather than a mere non-territorial military target.

In direct retaliation, Iran launched its first direct military attack on Israeli territory on 13 April 2024, firing over 300 missiles and drones from various directions, including Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. Despite Israel's air defense systems and support from allies such as the United States and the United Kingdom intercepting about 99% of the strikes, this assault marked the end of the shadow war era and the start of open conflict between the region's two major powers (Prasetyo, 2024).

The conflict reached its climax on 13 June 2025, when Israel launched Operation Rising Lion, a large-scale military strike on multiple Iranian strategic facilities, particularly those linked to the nuclear program. Targets included uranium enrichment sites at Natanz and Fordow, weapons

laboratories, IRGC military bases, as well as cyber and communication infrastructure. This operation was accompanied by an extensive cyber campaign, including hacks of Iranian financial systems such as Bank Sepah and the local crypto platform Nobitex. Precision air and drone strikes killed several key figures, including six nuclear scientists and several senior IRGC commanders.

Iran responded with Operation True Promise III, targeting vital Israeli centers including Tel Aviv, Haifa, and the Kirya military complex. However, the counterattack's effectiveness was limited due to Israel's successful defense systems such as Iron Dome and Arrow 3. A notable event in this phase was an assassination attempt on Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian via a missile strike in Tehran, which caused minor injuries. This incident reinforced the narrative that Israel sought not only to degrade Iran's military capabilities but also to weaken its political leadership directly.

The open conflict lasted 12 days and ended with a temporary ceasefire mediated by third parties, including Turkey and Qatar. Nonetheless, the impact was profound on the regional strategic balance. Iran suffered significant damage to its military and nuclear infrastructure, while Israel emerged as the dominant actor unafraid to demonstrate its military power openly. Analyses by the Financial Times and the Washington Post indicated that the conflict had altered the Middle East security landscape, with long-term implications for the arms race, regional alliance dynamics, and global actor involvement.

This phase demonstrated that the Iran–Israel conflict has structurally evolved beyond the realm of proxy warfare, entering a stage of open strategic confrontation driven by shifting threat perceptions and rational security calculations rather than isolated acts of aggression. The escalation reflects a breakdown of deterrence stability, in which both states increasingly interpret defensive measures by the other as offensive provocations, an archetypal security dilemma within the logic of the Regional Security Complex Theory (Buzan & Waever, 2003). Israel's preemptive strikes and Iran's retaliatory

posture are not merely reactive events but components of a strategic signaling process intended to reassert deterrence credibility and redefine the regional balance of power. Consequently, diplomatic boundaries and established conflict norms are eroded as both actors prioritize survival imperatives and regime legitimacy over adherence to international law. This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle of militarization and threat escalation, whereby limited strikes generate broader systemic insecurity and invite external intervention from global powers. Therefore, the 2023–2025 confrontation should be interpreted not as a temporary intensification of hostilities, but as evidence of a systemic transition wherein the Iran–Israel rivalry becomes institutionalized as a central axis of the Middle East’s evolving security order. This transformation signifies a qualitative shift in regional geopolitics, elevating the conflict to a level where local deterrence failures intersect with global strategic competition, thereby amplifying risks to both regional and international stability.

Implications of the Iran–Israel Conflict on Middle East Geopolitics

Based on a sociological perspective, the Iran–Israel conflict illustrates how war functions not only as a military phenomenon but also as a social institution that shapes collective identity, legitimizes power, and normalizes violence. As Charles Tilly (1985) famously stated, “war made the state, and the state made war,” implying that conflict and governance are mutually constitutive processes. Building on this logic, Katzenstein (2018) explains how political elites transform existential threats into legitimizing narratives of collective defense. In the case of Iran, the leadership consistently securitizes Israel as an ontological and ideological threat to the Islamic Republic’s survival, reinforcing domestic cohesion through symbolic rituals such as Quds Day and the rhetoric of “resistance” against Zionism. Conversely, Israel frames Iran’s nuclear ambitions as an existential danger to the Jewish state, invoking collective trauma from the Holocaust and the doctrine of national self-

preservation to consolidate public support for preemptive military action. Through these reciprocal securitization processes, both states construct self-reinforcing identities as besieged yet resilient actors. They transform external threats into internal solidarity and legitimize expanded military and political authority. War thus operates not only as a geopolitical mechanism but also as a performative sociopolitical process that continually redefines national identity, moral boundaries, and the acceptable scope of state violence.

The open conflict between Iran and Israel in June 2025 has not only triggered bilateral tensions but also generated far-reaching geopolitical reverberations across the Middle East. This escalation has disrupted the balance of power, intensified interstate rivalries, and created multidimensional instability with potentially long-term consequences. Drawing on classical geopolitical approaches and the Regional Security Complex theory (Buzan & Waever, 2003), at least five major implications can be identified from the most recent confrontation:

1. *Destabilization of the Regional Security Architecture*

The Iran–Israel conflict has further weakened an already fragile regional security architecture, long burdened by the Syrian civil war, the crisis in Yemen, and the stagnation of the Palestinian peace process. The direct hostilities between the two states have drawn neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria into a security dilemma due to geographic proximity and political entanglements. In the framework of security interdependence, as explained by Buzan and Waever (2003), the security of one state cannot be isolated from that of others in the region. As Iran and Israel launch attacks against each other, surrounding states are affected both directly through missile and drone strikes and indirectly through refugee crises, logistical disruptions, and rising sectarian tensions.

2. *Acceleration of Arms Race and Regional Militarization*

The escalation of open hostilities has led Middle Eastern states to increase their defense budgets and accelerate military modernization. Gulf

states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) feel threatened by the potential spillover of the conflict and have stepped up purchases of advanced air defense systems from the United States and Europe.

Israel, in turn, has intensified its development of domestic military technologies, including hypersonic interceptor systems and cyber-attack capabilities. Iran has responded by consolidating its asymmetric strategies, strengthening its proxy networks, and expanding long-range missile development. As a result, the region is increasingly caught in a security dilemma where one state's efforts to enhance its security are perceived as threats by others, thus fueling an arms race that heightens the risk of recurring conflict.

3. Reconfiguration of Regional Alliances and the Rise of New Blocs

The escalation of the Iran–Israel conflict has intensified existing geopolitical polarization while simultaneously catalyzing new patterns of alignment across the Middle East. Iran has consolidated the ‘Axis of Resistance’, comprising Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and various Shia militias in Iraq and Syria—as a counterweight to what it perceives as a Western- and Gulf-backed coalition. This network not only represents ideological solidarity but also functions as a deterrent structure designed to extend Iran’s strategic depth and asymmetric influence across multiple fronts (Al-Aloosy, 2023).

Conversely, the Abraham Accords of 2020 transformed Israel's regional posture, which normalized relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, and opened pathways for broader security cooperation with Gulf states. These accords, reaffirmed through U.S.-brokered defense dialogues and intelligence-sharing initiatives (2021-2023), enabled Israel to embed itself within a new coalition of moderate Arab governments that share a mutual concern over Iran’s regional ambitions.

This evolving constellation reflects a profound shift from ideologically defined alignments to pragmatic, interest-based coalitions centered on regime

survival, energy security, and threat containment. The growing entanglement of Gulf-Israeli and Iranian-led networks suggests the emergence of two overlapping regional blocs: one anchored in U.S. and Western defense frameworks, and another revolving around Iran's revisionist posture and its partnerships with Russia and China. These developments could accelerate the institutionalization of bloc-based defense structures, such as joint missile defense systems or intelligence fusion centers, which may either contribute to a nascent collective security order or deepen the risk of bloc-versus-bloc confrontation. Ultimately, the post-2020 regional order demonstrates that alliance formation in the Middle East is no longer driven solely by religious or ideological affinity but by shared strategic imperatives amid shifting great-power competition.

4. *Disruption of Global Trade and Energy Security*

has rendered global trade routes, particularly in the Persian Gulf, increasingly vulnerable. The Strait of Hormuz has emerged as the most vulnerable maritime chokepoint. The strait, located between Oman and Iran, handles approximately 21 million barrels of crude oil and petroleum liquids per day, accounting for about 21 percent of global petroleum consumption and nearly one-third of all seaborne oil trade (IEA, 2024). Israeli precision strikes on Iranian infrastructure and retaliatory drone activity have intensified military patrols by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Gulf navies, while Iran has repeatedly threatened to block the strait or target passing tankers if further attacks on its territory persist.

A full or even partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz could remove up to 15–20 million barrels per day from global supply chains, potentially driving oil prices above USD 150 per barrel—a level not seen since 2008, according to World Bank and IMF scenario models (World Bank, 2024). In such a scenario, global GDP growth could decline by 0.7 to 1 percent, and inflation rates could rise by up to 2 percentage points in energy-importing economies.

These compounded disruptions have triggered volatility across global

energy markets, with Brent crude prices fluctuating between USD 95 and 130 per barrel throughout mid-2025, while liquefied natural gas (LNG) futures in Europe rose by over 40 percent in response to supply uncertainty (EA, 2025). The resulting energy-price shocks have intensified inflationary pressures, complicated post-pandemic recovery trajectories, and deepened fiscal strain on developing economies reliant on fuel imports. Thus, the Iran–Israel confrontation functions not only as a regional security crisis but as a systemic stressor for global trade stability and energy governance, revealing the extent to which geopolitical volatility in the Middle East can reverberate through interconnected supply chains and financial markets worldwide.

5. *Intensification of Refugee Flows and Humanitarian Crises*

Beyond its strategic and economic consequences, the Iran–Israel conflict has deepened an already fragile humanitarian situation across the Middle East. Airstrikes and cross-border hostilities have displaced thousands across Lebanon, Syria, and northern Iraq, while Iran’s retaliation raised fears of attacks on Israel-aligned states such as Jordan and Saudi Arabia. These dynamics have triggered new refugee movements into neighboring countries already struggling with resource scarcity and internal instability. According to UNOCHA (2025), food insecurity levels in southern Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen have risen by nearly 35 percent, while access to medical services has declined by 40 percent due to the destruction of healthcare infrastructure and movement restrictions.

Furthermore, blockades of energy and food infrastructure have deepened civilian suffering, particularly in areas with Iranian proxy presence, such as Gaza, southern Lebanon, and Yemen. Operationally, international aid organizations face mounting barriers, including restricted access, communication blackouts, and continuous security threats to humanitarian convoys. Relief corridors have been intermittently opened through Qatar- and Turkey-mediated negotiations, but the closure of at least six major supply routes documented by UNOCHA (2025) continues to delay aid distribution.

These humanitarian conditions illustrate the broader moral cost of geopolitical escalation: the securitization of regional politics increasingly occurs at the expense of civilian welfare, amplifying long-term development deficits and weakening institutional resilience across conflict-affected states.

In analytical terms, the Iran–Israel confrontation has transcended its bilateral nature, becoming a structural determinant of global geopolitical and human security. The conflict’s multi-layered dynamics intertwine ideological contestation, military escalation, and humanitarian collapse, forming a regional security dilemma that radiates from Tehran and Tel Aviv to Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. These overlapping crises affirm that Middle Eastern instability cannot be mitigated through coercive deterrence or bilateral diplomacy alone; rather, it necessitates the creation of an inclusive regional security and humanitarian coordination framework integrating rival blocs under principles of cooperative security and sustained dialogue. Absent such mechanisms, the region risks remaining locked in cycles of violence and displacement, with each escalation reverberating across global economic and political systems.

CONCLUSION

The Iran–Israel conflict epitomizes the intersection of ideology, strategy, and geopolitics within the broader dynamics of Middle Eastern security. Since the fall of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the relationship between the two nations has transformed from formal diplomatic ties into enduring hostility. The root cause of this conflict lies in the existential threats each nation perceives from the other, threats that have been repeatedly articulated by the highest political and religious leaders of both Iran and Israel.

The conflict has evolved through six distinct phases, ranging from strategic partnership and ideological hostility to proxy warfare and then open military conflict in 2025. Each phase reflects how shifts in domestic politics,

regional alignments, and great-power involvement interact to perpetuate instability. The analysis demonstrates that ideology alone cannot account for the persistence of the conflict; rather, it is the structural logic of security competition and identity-based legitimacy that sustains it.

In terms of geopolitical implications, this conflict has had a direct impact on the stability of the Middle East. Heightened tensions have led to the erosion of regional security structures, fueled an arms race, triggered the formation of new strategic alliances, disrupted global trade and energy routes, and exacerbated humanitarian crises. The resulting instability not only affects the two nations involved but also implicates global actors with vested strategic interests in the Middle East. These include the United States, Russia, China, the European Union, various international organizations, and Gulf States.

Therefore, the international community urgently needs a multilateral and holistic approach to de-escalate tensions between Iran and Israel. Strengthening the role of international and regional institutions is essential to prevent the recurrence of large-scale hostilities and to build a durable security order in the Middle East. The United Nations should move beyond reactive crisis diplomacy towards anticipatory conflict prevention, focusing on mechanisms such as early-warning systems, confidence-building frameworks, and inclusive negotiation platforms that address the underlying security dilemma between Iran and Israel. A renewed multilateral approach could enhance both legitimacy and enforcement capacity in future peace efforts.

In the long term, such institutional innovation would mark a strategic transition from conflict management to conflict resolution. If effectively implemented, these initiatives could reduce the recurrence of proxy confrontations, stabilize global energy markets, and integrate humanitarian considerations into strategic dialogue. Conversely, the absence of such forward-looking mechanisms risks perpetuating cycles of escalation, heightening global insecurity, and entrenching the Middle East as a perpetual epicenter of geopolitical volatility.

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