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GLOBAL POLITICAL REVIEW
HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y

VOL. IX, ISSUE III, SUMMER (SEPTEMBER-2024)

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Article Title

Evolving Balance of Power in the Middle East: Iran-Israel Standoff Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy

Abstract

The Israel-Iranian conflict can be considered a major contributor to changes in the power balance in the Middle East. This competition has profound implications for regional stability and has impacted almost every realm of Iran's foreign policy. It influences its decision-making regarding its domestic policies, strategy on military actions, neighboring countries, and its nuclear plan. If both countries head towards different goals, which they currently are, there is a high possibility of an escalation that will have severe impacts on both regional and international security. The principal item of Iran's "deterrence strategy" is developing and placing missiles capable of reaching Israel. Iran also threatens Israel directly and makes a buffer zone through proxy peoples' wars in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria. This conflict has led Iran closer to many non-state actors and governments in the region than ever before.

Keywords: Iran-Israel Strategic Rivalry, Iranian Foreign Policy, Key Players in Middle East, Iranian Proxies/Partners

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Citing this Article

08	Evolving Balance of Power in the Middle East: Iran-Israel Standoff Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy						
	Author	Rida Tanvir Syed Qandil Abbas		**DOI**	10.31703/gpr.2024(IX-III).08		
Pages	77-84	**Year**	2024	**Volume**	IX	**Issue**	III
Referencing & Citing Styles	**APA**	Tanvir, R., & Abbas, S. Q. (2024). Evolving Balance of Power in the Middle East: Iran-Israel Standoff Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy. *Global Political Review*, *IX*(III), 77-84. https://doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2024(VII-III).08					
	CHICAGO	Tanvir, Rida, and Syed Qandil Abbas. 2024. "Evolving Balance of Power in the Middle East: Iran-Israel Standoff Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy." *Global Political Review* IX (III):77-84. doi: 10.31703/gpr.2024(VII-III).08.					
	HARVARD	TANVIR, R. & ABBAS, S. Q. 2024. Evolving Balance of Power in the Middle East: Iran-Israel Standoff Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy. *Global Political Review,* IX, 77-84.					
	MHRA	Tanvir, Rida, and Syed Qandil Abbas. 2024. 'Evolving Balance of Power in the Middle East: Iran-Israel Standoff Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy', *Global Political Review*, IX: 77-84.					
	MLA	Tanvir, Rida, and Syed Qandil Abbas. "Evolving Balance of Power in the Middle East: Iran-Israel Standoff Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy." *Global Political Review* IX.III (2024): 77-84. Print.					
	OXFORD	Tanvir, Rida and Abbas, Syed Qandil (2024), 'Evolving Balance of Power in the Middle East: Iran-Israel Standoff Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy', *Global Political Review,* IX (III), 77-84.					
	TURABIAN	Tanvir, Rida and Syed Qandil Abbas. "Evolving Balance of Power in the Middle East: Iran-Israel Standoff Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy." *Global Political Review* IX, no. III (2024): 77-84. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gpr.2024(VII-III).08.					

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Introduction

Balance of Power Theory

Balance of theory is an important theory in International Relations but before going into the core assumptions of the theory it is vital to investigate other details. It is imperative to look at the core assumptions of international polity. First, the international system is anarchic in nature with no system present to control the affairs of the states (Waltz, 1979). Due to the absence of a government on the international level to mitigate a threat posed to the sovereignty of the states, states rely on "self-help" or "seek-help". Self-help comes in the form of strengthening oneself militarily economically or both. However, in the case of seek-help states rely on bandwagoning, buck-passing, chain-ganging, or in some cases aligning themselves with the threatening state (Waltz, 1979). Secondly, a point that must be kept in mind is that states are the major actors in the international system. It is the states that formulate foreign policies, set up new trends, and legitimize the use of force and the terms of engagement in the international arena.

Since states are the unitary actors in the international system, their hegemony remains in terms of making the rules. However, a more interesting point is that factors in the evolving balance of power of the 21st century are the non-state actors and the transnational actors. With the increasing power of the non-state actors, it has become crucial to consider the non-state actors in the balance of power system. Non-state actors like the Taliban in Afghanistan are a true example of how important the non-state actors are. They have successfully pushed out the U.S. influence from Afghanistan and have set up a government of their own. Despite the international pressures they tend to remain firm in their actions and call them as legitimate as that of any other state. Another fact about the balance of theory is that a balance of power system can exist both in bipolar and multipolar world order. The validity of the theory often gets challenged in the unipolar world order as for the theory to hold there must be at least one more power to create a balance.

Three factors are essential in understanding how states decide to balance a situation with the international system. First comes the "intention" about which Robert Jervis has explained that the balance of power is often viewed as the consequence of a security dilemma. States perceive a threat that is faced by them in the international system and thus decide whether to align themselves with the threatening state, align with the powerful, or bandwagon. This is where the intentions of the states factor in. The second factor is the "preference" of the state, whether they go for the relative gain or the absolute gain. John Mearsheimer contends that states, after perceiving the threat react with military might while disregarding all other capabilities. The logic behind this action is that states believe that military strength is mightier than any other power a state possesses. Thus, portraying an offensive posture pacifies the emerging or imminent threat (Johnson & Thayer, 2016). Neoliberalists like Robert Keohane argue that states must seek absolute gain which is only possible through cooperation and interdependence. This way the outcomes will be more constructive and progressive (Keohane, 1982).

Thirdly comes the contingency plan, which is when all the intentions and preferences of the states go amok. Sometimes the actions taken by the state after perceiving the threat may not reap the desired outcomes. For example, despite Prussia's obvious expansionist tendencies, the European powers collectively chose to support the upstart competitor in the 1800s, demonstrating that both intention and preference are vulnerable to interpretation based on the circumstances. This paper, however, will consider the evolving balance of power in the Middle East while reflecting on the key players in the region and how their alliances have shifted over the span of time. The focus will be on the Iran-Israeli strategic rivalry and how Ian has been acquiring political and military alliances to counter Israel. The role of the various proxies will be considered as well as how well has Iran been dealing with these proxies which Iran addresses as their partners. The domestic and regional factors that have a major impact on the regional outlook and shaping of Iranian foreign policy will also be discussed in this paper.

Key Players and Shifting Alliances

The Middle East is a region characterized by intricate geopolitical dynamics, with major players and revolving alliances greatly influencing its configuration. The key players in the region are Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkiye, UAE, and Israel. These key players have varied interests in the Middle Eastern region. Iran is a major Shia power in the Middle Eastern region and beyond, while Saudi Arabia remains a dominant Sunni power exerting its influence on the Arab world. The United States remains the longest-standing ally, with a strong military and economic support of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This alliance of KSA has remained a challenge for Iran as the USA has been the cause of multiple sanctions on Iran (Shah et al., 2018). Although Israel has not been formally recognized by KSA however, since the Abraham Accord (Baqai & Mehreen, 2021) the common discontent over Iran remains extremely cooperative.

Iran and Saudi rivalry has remained a bone of content in the Middle Eastern region over issues like sectarianism and matters pertaining to geopolitics. Iranian-backed Houthi rivals in Yemen remain a major concern of KSA. UAE is mostly dominant in the Gulf region and the Horn of Africa and remains a rising power in the region with a proactive foreign policy. UAE has remained a close ally of Saudi Arabia; however, they have contrasting views on the issue of Yemen. Like Saudi Arabia UAE also normalizes relations with Israel through the

Abraham Accords. This has led to cooperation between the two actors in various sectors. Furthermore, the UAE actively participates in the Yemeni conflict however, over time it has scaled back from its participation in the conflict.

Turkiye however, is trying to reinvent itself and re-exert its former Ottoman dominance in the region. The great Ottoman Empire ruled the Middle East for many centuries however, it came to its end during World War I. Since its fall, Turkiye remains what was left of the great Ottoman Empire. Currently, Turkiye enjoys an alliance with regional actors like Qatar as both countries share similar concerns over regional issues. Although Turkiye is a member state of NATO, however, as far as the relations with the Western allies are concerned, it remains constrained. Turkiye faces numerous challenges pertaining to the Kurdish military groups both the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria as well as domestically. Furthermore, as far as Syria is concerned, apart from the Kurdish challenge, Turkiye is involved in the long-standing civil war as a supporter of the various opposition groups. Turkiye has been condemning the acts of Israel in Palestine however, it remains restrained from any direct confrontation.

Israel is another major actor in the region with military power and technological and economic capabilities. Israel is the only Jewish state not only in the Middle East but in the world as well. Tensions between Israel and the regional actors have been there since the inception of Israel. United States remains a major ally of Israel as it provides significant and unconditional aid to the U.S. as well as military support (Shoaib et al., 2018). Following the Abraham accord, Israel enjoys cooperation with the Gulf countries like Bahrain and UAE. Saudi Arabia remains a silent ally of Israel as neither country has recognized the other but indirect cooperation has been there. This support mainly includes economic cooperation between the said states. Iran remains a primary threat to the existence of Israel. This remains large due to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestinian territories. Israel has been responsible for human rights violations in Palestine and the attack on the Hamas leadership Ismail Haniyeh in Iran (Al Jazeera, 2024a).

Iran has been striving to expand its regional influence and become the leading power. Iran is currently influential in more than 3 continents in the world (Akbarzadeh & Azizi, 2024). Some of the major allies of Iran include President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Bashar's regime safeguards Iranian interests beyond its borders. Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Palestine are partners of Iran in the region. They are often referred to as terrorist groups by the U.S. and the West however, Iran treats them as its partners. Following the assassination of Saddam Hussain, Iraq being a Shia-majority country has not only come under the influence of Iran but has emerged as an ally of Iran as well. Russia and China remain major strategic economic and military supporters outside of the Middle East. China even brokered a diplomatic deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia in 2023. This rapprochement was a groundbreaking achievement on the part of China and a major accomplishment in the history of the Middle East. Following the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the tension between the two has lessened, leaving Israel as the main arch-nemesis of Iran in the region. As for extra-regional rivalry, the United States has been a cause of long-standing tension for Iran due to its nuclear program.

Arab nations have been trying to familiarise themselves with Israel; especially the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. For the most part, this is achieved by targeting Iran, extending the regional realignment, creating new economic enclaves, and establishing security partnerships. To the present, it remains an effective dynamic in Middle Eastern relations and in the ongoing wars in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. Even then diplomatic solution was sought but still there exist numerous barriers. Turkey's diplomatic activism from Syria to Libya and Qatar and supporting the country against the blockade of Saudi Arabia have changed the relations of the system in the region and produced new opportunities for cooperation and confrontation. In an effort to counter what regional nations see as a lack of commitment by the United States to the region in the last few administrations, regional nations are looking to create new coalitions and increase their military capabilities.

Iran-Israel Strategic Rivalry

The overall strategic rivalry between Iran and Israel on aspects such as military, politics, ideologies, and proxies has been a constant issue in the Middle East.

This competition is one of the biggest and most enduring in the Middle East. Iran's revolution in 1979 can be seen as almost the start of official aggressiveness towards Israel. This was because from the perspective of the new leadership in Iran headed by Ayatollah Khomeini, the Jewish nation was the "Zionist regime" and an illegal occupant of Arab territories. This was due to Iran's ambition to be the premier country in the Muslim world and its indoctrinated antipathy toward the state of Israel. Due to their shared concerns over Arab nationalism, Iran and Israel had reasonably strong connections prior to 1979, cooperating in the military and intelligence fields. The leadership of Iran sees Israel as an outpost of the West in the Middle East, a symbol of imperialism and Muslim persecution. Iran opposes any normalization of relations with Israel and supports Palestinian organizations because of this philosophy.

Israel has always considered Iran as a threat to its existence especially due to the leadership rhetoric regarding the destruction of Israel. The rivalry between them has also been at large due to the support shown by Iran to Hezbollah and Hamas, who are confronting Israel in the longstanding conflict in Palestine Israel. Another major concern or cause of rivalry between Iran and Israel is the supposed nuclear ambitions of Iran. The Iranian leadership has time and again cleared their stance over the issue of nuclear that it is not the prerogative of Iran to become a nuclear weapon state. Despite Israel being a nuclear weapon state, it has lobbied with international actors, in particular the U.S. to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapon state. The Iranian leadership has claimed that a weapon that can exterminate entire humanity is unislamic and therefore is not a national prerogative. However, if push comes to shove and Iran has been marginalized to the extent of survival being at stake then Iran is just a step away from testing its nuclear weapon (Tanvir & Abbas, 2021).

Israel has employed all means available at its disposal to delay and sabotage the Iranian nuclear weapon program from progressing. These means range from domestic factors including, military and intelligence operations to relying on sanctions being imposed on Iran by the U.S., UN, and EU. Iran has been relying on its partners, Hezbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad to contain and curtail the atrocities of Israel in Palestine. However, to weaken Iran, Israel

has been relying on international support that resulted in the assassination of General Qasseim Soleimani and the recent attack on the Hamas leader, Ismail Haniyeh. Israel has been trying to undermine the Iranian influence in the region. In response, Israel has launched many military operations against Iranian sites in Syria and Iraq with the goal of reducing Iranian military encroachment in those nations. The assassination of Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah on 27 September 2024 implies that Israel is trying to drag Iran into the ongoing war (Fernández, 2024). This iterates Israel's instigation of dragging Iran into the war which is likely to become the third world war.

Iran's strategy to resist Israel heavily relies on its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Assad regime in Syria. Iran wants to function as a strategic barrier and dissuade Israel by forging a strong presence in these nations. Israel has reacted by attempting to deepen its relations with Sunni Arab nations such as Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Part of the motivation for these alliances—highlighted by the Abraham Accords—comes from a common apprehension about Iran's military might and regional influence. Israel has made a strong case for economic sanctions against Iran, especially considering the latter's nuclear program. The economic effects of these sanctions on Iran have been substantial, escalating the competition even further. A growing battleground in this rivalry is the cyber domain. Cyberattacks like the Stuxnet virus, which attacked Iran's nuclear installations, are thought to have been orchestrated by Israel. Iran has been connected, in turn, to cyberattacks against Israeli infrastructure (Givens et al., 2022).

There is a serious risk of direct armed conflict because of the rivalry. Both countries have managed to avoid full-scale conflict, but tensions are maintained by ongoing military skirmishes, assassinations (such as those of Iranian nuclear scientists), and proxy conflicts. The rivalry has an impact on international diplomacy, especially when it comes to the United States and Europe, who are frequently forced to choose between managing their relations with Iran and backing Israel's security concerns.

Iranian Politico-Military Alliances to Counter Israel (Proxies/Partners)

Iran's diplomatic and military ties, especially those formed through strategic alliances and proxy groups, are essential to its counteroffensive against Israel. These partnerships are part of Iran's larger plan to combat Israeli influence, project strength throughout the Middle East, and ward off possible dangers. The most important and potent Iranian proxy/partner is Hezbollah. It functions as a military and political power in Lebanon, maintaining an independent, well-equipped militia from the Lebanese government. Hezbollah receives financial support, armaments, training, and logistical assistance from Iran. Hezbollah possesses missiles and rockets that are capable of penetrating deep into Israeli territory. Hezbollah and Israel have fought each other several times, the most recent being the Lebanon War in 2006. The gang continues to pose a danger to Israel's northern border.

President Bashar al-Assad's Syria is an important Iranian ally, especially since the start of the civil conflict in 2011. Iran's assistance has been essential to maintaining Assad's government. To assist Assad, Iran has sent out Revolutionary Guard units, military advisors, and affiliated militias (such as the Iraqi Harakat al-Nujaba and the Afghan Fatemiyoun Brigade). Iran also transfers weapons to Hezbollah through Syria. Iran can project force in the Eastern Mediterranean and face Israel from Syria, which offers a vital front. This includes Golan Heights. Despite ideological disagreements, Iran supports Hamas, the Gaza Strip's governing organization (Hamas is Sunni, while Iran is Shia). Iran gives Hamas money, equipment, and training so that it may keep up its battle with Israel, particularly by using missile strikes and tunnel operations. As Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) acts as a direct proxy in the Palestinian territories, it is much more closely aligned with Iran than Hamas. The gang has been actively engaged in hostilities with Israel. PIJ is heavily dependent on Iranian military supply and money.

The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an umbrella group for numerous Iranian-backed Iraqi Shia militias, are crucial to both the security of the country and the expansion of Iranian influence in the area. Many of these militias are equipped, trained, and funded by Iran, which plans to use them to oppose American hegemony in Iraq and even create a new front against Israel. In the PMF, there is the Kata'ib Hezbollah subgroup. Kata'ib

Hezbollah is one of Iran's most loyal proxies and has fought the US and Israel numerous times. The Houthi is a Shia insurgent group in Yemen that has accused Iran of supporting them in an overarching effort to counter Saudi influence in the area. While the Houthis themselves have very little direct impact on Israel, they are still another front in the Iranian sphere of influence. The Houthis receive funds, weapons, and training from Iran. The Yemeni aid by Houthis has been benefiting from Iranian Drones and Missiles in their fight against the KSA but such exotic weapons pose a threat to attacks against Israel in the future.

The regional and worldwide ramifications of the conflict between Iran and Israel are further highlighted by the intricacy of these linkages. The long-standing hostility between Iran and Israel has significantly escalated, especially with direct military encounters. Iran fired more than 180 ballistic missiles at Israel on 1st October 2024 in retaliation for the killings of Hassan Nasrallah and Ismail Haniyeh, two prominent Hamas and Hezbollah members. This was a pivotal moment in the strategic rivalry between Iran and Israel and one of the most powerful missile assaults of their continuing battle. Even though most of the missiles were intercepted, some of them were able to strike both military and civilian targets, such as homes and air bases (Al Jazeera, 2024b).

Domestic and Regional Factors Shaping Iranian Foreign Policy

A complex web of regional and domestic forces interacts to influence Tehran's approach to international relations, especially in the Middle East, and hence shape Iranian foreign policy. Gaining knowledge of these elements helps one better understand Iran's foreign policy choices and relations with major international and regional players. Iranian foreign policy is significantly shaped by the Islamic Revolution and its ideological underpinnings. Iran's foreign policy is founded on the ideologies of the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Iran was positioned as a major force in the Muslim world by the revolutionary government, headed by Ayatollah Khomeini, who encouraged the export of its revolutionary ideas and resisted Western influence. Anti-Western, and especially anti-American, sentiments became deeply ingrained in Iran's political culture after the revolution. As a

result, Western interests in the region are regularly challenged by the foreign policy that has emerged.

The supreme power over Iran's foreign policy is currently vested in Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader. The entire strategy is shaped by his directions, particularly regarding ties with the West and neighboring countries. In terms of foreign operations as well as internal security, the IRGC is indispensable. It plays a crucial role in carrying out Iran's military plans overseas and in assisting partner organizations. Hardliners and reformists are at odds in Iranian politics, which has an impact on how the nation approaches diplomacy and international accords like the nuclear deal (JCPOA) (Ishaque et al., 2017). Iran's economy has been badly hit by international sanctions, especially those imposed by the United States. Tehran's foreign policy is shaped by this economic pressure, which encourages it to forge ties with non-Western nations like China and Russia and to take a tough stand against the West. Iran, for all its revolutionary rhetoric, also wants to stabilize its economy through commerce and investment abroad, which has led to sporadic diplomatic attempts to establish relations with neighboring nations and Europe.

The primary force behind Iranian foreign policy is the competition with Saudi Arabia. The proxy battles in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq are clear examples of this struggle, which has its roots in sectarian (Sunni vs. Shia) and geopolitical tensions. On the geographical and political map, Iran occupies an opposite position to Israel. Iran has a problem with Israel and supports actors such as Hamas or Hezbollah in order to keep the latter in check. Iran has paid lots of money in order to ensure its influence in both Syria and Iraq since it sees them as strategic in its regional domination. This influence is backed by such means as military, political, and military support of Shia militias. In particular, thanks to Hezbollah, Iran has precisely become rooted in Lebanon and can impact the political situation in this country as well as exert pressure on Israel. Of course, Iran and Turkey are bitter rivals in Syria and in many other matters, but they do negotiate on occasion in matters such as trade, and security.

This has been the push for Iran to forge relations with Asia's giants namely China and Russia with an aim to reduce the economic impact of sanctions. The recent diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia

and Iran arranged by China in the year 2023 clearly express that the diplomatic relations between China and Iran are getting stronger. This is because China's Iranian relations are diverse in as much as they cover geopolitical, military, and economic partnerships. China is Iran's biggest economic partner in terms of import and export business with Iran being the largest customer of Chinese products with trade turnover of tens of billions of US dollars every year. Chi imports oil, gas, and other products from Iran and on the other hand, Iran imports consumer products, electronics, and machinery among others from China. China has been instrumental in helping Iran mitigate the impacts of US sanctions that have seen Iran's biggest buyer and partner continue to buy Iranian oil and invest in Iran's oil and other infrastructure projects sometimes in violation of the sanctions.

China and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding for a partnership to cooperate for 25 years to showcase that the two states are consistently involved in the military, infrastructure, and different economic projects in 2021. The pact also involves China investing in a few segments, including energy, transport, and telecommunication. China is Iran's major source of military equipment, arms, and missiles and has in the past ignored sanctions that demanded it stop supplying the Iranians. They have also separately involved themselves in combined military exercises, thus pointing out their progressive defense relations. Iran and China still do not desire the United States of America to dictate power in the Middle East and Asia respectively. This has fostered military cooperation as well as the exchange of intelligence as both seek a secure and safe world. China and Iran are against the domination of the United States in international affairs especially issues to do with their regions.

China opposes sanctions against Iran and supports diplomatic solutions to issues like Iran's nuclear program, and it has repeatedly supported Iran in international venues like the UN. Iran is a key partner in China's Belt and Road Initiative, which aims to strengthen economic ties throughout Asia, Europe, and Africa. Iran's favorable location makes it an important entry point for Chinese investment and trade, which benefits the alliance. Notwithstanding the strong relationship, there are still challenges, including Iran's volatile economy

and the real-world issues resulting from US sanctions. Chinese companies have periodically avoided doing business with Iran to avoid more sanctions. Although China and Iran have different goals, they disagree on several issues. China's broader geopolitical objectives sometimes require Beijing to maintain a balance between its relationships with Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Conclusion

Iran-Israel relations are anticipated to continue antagonistic and combative in the future because of a confluence of long-standing ideological differences, regional power conflicts, and strategic concerns on the part of both countries. The Iranian government continues to view Israel as its primary regional adversary and an illegitimate state, stemming from the revolutionary aspirations of 1979. The likelihood of this ideological stance changing anytime soon is low, which will maintain the intense hostility between the two nations. Given Iran's nuclear aspirations and support for organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas that actively oppose Israel, Israel views Iran as an existential threat. Iran's nuclear program status will continue to be important. Israel may take preemptive military action in response to Iran's further nuclear advancements, which would heighten tensions. Although they are unlikely to address the fundamental problems, diplomatic initiatives, like the possible renewal of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), may momentarily lower the likelihood of violence.

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