

THE GEOPOLITICAL VARIABLE AND ITS IMPACTS ON THE MANAGEMENT OF THE IRAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT

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Introduction

Geopolitics in the international arena has seen several accelerating shifts and changes over the past two decades, especially regarding the major world powers' map of geographical clout as well as the spheres of regional and international competition. Global developments and cutthroat competition between the global poles have led the arenas of competition between the major world powers to extend to geographical regions that have become the focus of strategic priorities such as the Indo-Pacific, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. This has led to the escalation of disputes in these regions whereas the disputes in the traditional Middle Eastern hotspots have cooled down.

Looking at the Iran-Israel conflict, which falls within the scope of this study, we find that it has been impacted in one way or another by the aforesaid geopolitical developments. This includes the decline of the US presence in the Middle East, pivoting resources to confront the mounting Russo-Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific, Central Asia and Eastern Europe, the collapse of the nuclear talks,

formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with Tehran moving closer to the nuclear threshold. This is in addition to the geopolitical shifts in the Middle East, represented by some Middle Eastern nations opting for ending all differences and tensions with Iran to secure their security interests in light of the declining US protection umbrella. Yet another factor is the mounting tensions between Tehran and Tel Aviv over the past few years in the context of the “shadow war.” All of the aforesaid developments led to an increase in the indicators of perceived threats from Iran against Israel.

To counter the threat, Tel Aviv is seeking to develop a confrontation strategy against Iran. It is opting for strategies that serve as alternatives to its security policies, in accordance with the core tenet of its offensive military doctrine of “transforming the battle to the enemy’s territory.”⁽¹⁾ Additionally, Israel seeks to overcome the obstacle posed by the distance separating Tehran and Tel Aviv — 2,200 kilometers — by utilizing the geopolitical variable in the management of the dispute between the two sides. Iran has been seeking over the past decade to encircle Israel through taking advantage of the geopolitical tectonics created by the geopolitical transformations in the region in the context of what is known as the “shatterbelt” in the geographical regions surrounding Tel Aviv — which is also known among Arab research and media platforms as the Shiite Crescent (Syria, Lebanon and Iraq) — to tighten the noose around it in its lebensraum. Similarly, it seems that Israel is seeking to achieve the same end through making geopolitical infiltrations into Iran’s lebensraum to the north, thus creating a foothold in these regions.

These developments in turn give rise to the question regarding the repercussions of Israeli cooperation with the countries located in the South Caucasus and Central Asia adjacent to Iran’s northern borders, on the direction of the Iran-Israel conflict. Could this cooperation enable Tel Aviv to create its own “Israeli Crescent” or shatterbelt akin to Iran’s Shiite Crescent in the Middle East? Last but not least, will the geopolitical map of the South Caucasus — in terms of spheres of influence and the control of regional actors — help Israel achieve its objectives in that region? The study will answer these questions.

The Relationship Between Geopolitics and Conflict Management

The literature focusing on studying the patterns of conflicts between countries indicates that all patterns in international relations contain assumptions that highlight regional and global conflict. International conflict has been engrained throughout the course of history. In the case of geopolitics, the assumption of conflict reflects both the conservative bias

and the traditional security perception within the framework of geopolitics because it is in harmony with the assumption that conflict is a natural phenomenon in all political relations — and conflict is present in human nature and states' behavior. Yet the global stage reflects a dangerous environment; thus, the world's countries must focus on national integrity for the sake of survival. This prompts statesmen to guide their nations to what guarantees them the assumption of safe positions to preserve their vital resources that are available in their own environments.⁽²⁾

Here it is worth noting that Colin S. Gray (1943 –2020), a British-American writer on geopolitics and professor of International Relations and Strategic Studies at the University of Reading, was among those who pioneered the idea that conflicts are deeply engrained in geopolitics. He indicated that the significance of geopolitics, and therefore the Heartland Theory coined by Sir Halford John Mackinder, lies particularly in the fact that it discusses a chief dimension in global disputes: the geographical dimension. The significance lies also in the fact that the theory seeks to specify and explicate the patterns of global disputes. Gray's hypothesis has represented an important element of the study of geopolitics from the classical perspective.⁽³⁾ In this respect, it could be said that there are some geographical formations in the context of the science of geopolitics that boost or curtail the dangers of a dispute. These are constantly placed within the spatial sphere —just like pivotal geopolitical structures, foremost of which are:

Shatterbelt: These regions were given a wide array of names in the past, including “crush,” “clash zones,” “middle tiers,” “belts of political change,” “devil's triangles” and “zones of contact.”⁽⁴⁾ The concept of a shatterbelt was commonly employed in Central Europe and the Middle East and to a lesser degree in Southeast Asia by early writers on geopolitics.⁽⁵⁾

In their original categorizations, the perceived characteristics of a shatterbelt included political, ethnic and economic tensions but still invited interventions on the part of more powerful neighbors. Stimulus wars through which smaller states have encouraged larger outside powers to intervene in their favor against local rivals are the hallmark of a shatterbelt. Briefly put, a shatterbelt sparks conflict and war, thus posing a danger to regional and global peace.⁽⁶⁾

A shatterbelt emerges when specific countries, both at the local and strategic level, decide to engage in alliances with/against friends or foes — both local and strategic. These alliances are formed through political options rather than specific regional characteristics. Therefore, we find strategic rivals competing against others in specific regions; and these regions are also restive. Local regions accept the intervention on the

part of major world power patrons. The final upshot sees these alliances deepening, escalating into prospects of war.⁽⁷⁾

• **Checkerboards:** This structure presents another position in the context of the balance of powers, the conflicting rivalries and alliances that arise in scattered periods throughout history. The diplomatic patterns in South American foreign affairs provide an example of this geopolitical structure. The checkerboard best fits the maxim “Your neighbor is your natural enemy and your neighbor’s neighbor is your friend.” Borders are always a source of international tensions between neighboring nations, but these potential balances break down through the establishment of alliances with neighbors who are located in more distant regions and continents. The level of stability inside a checkerboard is determined by the precise geographical configurations identified within that structure.⁽⁸⁾ The most evident example of this structure is the Peloponnesian War experienced by the Ancient Greeks. The checkerboard pattern can lead to greater violence; this pattern had led to the thwarting of all peaceful settlements. The borders of competitors were close enough for several city states and empires to incentivize rivalry. The Athenians’ failed siege on Syracuse weakened the city, and the neighboring Persians helped fund the Spartan fleet, turning the contest to Sparta’s advantage, a pivotal pass that vanquished the Athenians after a 30-year war.⁽⁹⁾

This is analogous to some of the current conflict patterns in the Middle East, several Balkan regions and the South Caucasus.

Overall, it could be said that the correlation between geopolitics and the conflict that arises between countries, as mentioned above, is an introduction to applying the aforesaid theoretical projection to the Iran-Israel conflict, encompassing the Middle East, the South Caucasus and Central Asia. There is a relationship between the geopolitical variables that produce geographical formations such as a shatterbelt and the conflicts stimulated by these formations. A shatterbelt appears when the competing major world powers have a foothold in a certain geographical region in which they seriously vie to establish dominance. This is because they perceive strong interests in doing so and that there are available opportunities for creating a foothold for an alliance with the region’s countries, which increases the likelihood of the dispute escalating into a proxy war between the major world powers.⁽¹⁰⁾ Focus will be placed on the impact of these geopolitical formations and structures which have emerged in the Middle East and Asia regions; both ravaged by local disputes within a number of their countries. These formations and structures invite interventions on the part of outside strategic competitors in collaboration with local competitors, as is the case in the areas of dispute in the Middle

East, including Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen, in addition to the South Caucasus and Central Asia. Therefore, the study will discuss how far these geopolitical formations impact the Iran-Israel conflict, given that the two are rival regional powerhouses in the mentioned regions, both forging patterns of alliances with local disputants there. These alliances are established through political options rather than specific regional characteristics, with the aim of encirclement at times and containment at others.

The Geopolitical Map of the Middle East and the Iranian Strategy to Encircle Israel

The Middle East's geopolitical map has seen a host of accelerated shifts over the past two decades. These transformations have impacted the region's dynamics. The US invasion of Iraq and the so-called Arab Spring uprisings —which erupted in 2011 and 2012 — led to a decline in the role of traditional Arab powers such as Iraq and Syria. This enabled outside regional powers to increase their clout and activities, creating a foothold to fill the void left behind by these Arab powerhouses. Iran also embarked on significantly enhancing its clout in the region. Tehran began taking advantage of regional tensions and the geopolitical shifts to bolster its clout. As a result, several of the region's countries are now ravaged by dangerously destructive disputes (thus becoming shatterbelts) in a way that allowed Tehran to seize this moment to improve its positions in the region.

Thus, the continuing geopolitical transformations in the region are the result of:

- The US invasion and the conflicts that have ravaged the region over the past two decades.
- The events related to the so-called Arab Spring, which have led to the weakening and destruction of the main Arab countries in the region such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen.
- The decline in the US protective umbrella as a result of the Middle East decreasing in significance and priority for the US administration.
- The rise in the trend toward regionalism in global politics, which depends on the significance of regional powers and institutions as well as security alliances;

BRICS, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

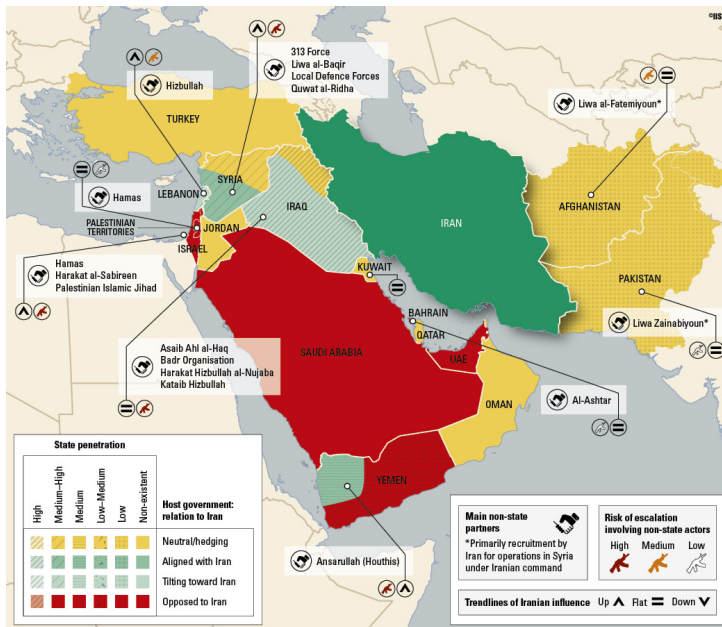
- The rise of non-state actors involved in the political, economic and social processes of the region's countries.

All the foregoing has led to accelerating transformations in the Middle East. As a result, the chief regional actors (Iran, Israel and Turkey) as well as the global actors (the United States and Russia) have started looking for political solutions that take into account the new regional realities while at the same time protecting their own interests.

In light of this geopolitical regional reality, Iran has worked on consolidating and implementing its strategic culture to increase its clout and secure its interests in the face of US-Israeli clout in the region through its “forward defense strategy and “asymmetrical warfare doctrine.”⁽¹¹⁾ The rationale of these doctrines is based on maintaining strong ties with political and military entities throughout the region (powerful government entities and non-state actors in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen) as well as deploying forces and militias on the ground. This network is known as “the Axis of Resistance” by the Iranian leadership.⁽¹²⁾

By pursuing this approach and strategy, Iran seeks to push any potential military front as far away as possible from its borders as well as deter the enemy (Israel) from encircling it. Tehran also aims to maintain the ability to threaten, attack and engage rivals (Israel, the United States and Saudi Arabia) in an asymmetrical fashion through its proxies outside Iran.⁽¹³⁾ Tehran has already succeeded over the past decade in increasing its presence and clout in a number of the region’s countries in the context of the so-called Shiite Crescent nations (Syria, Iraq and Lebanon). It gained a bigger foothold in Syria, thus increasing support for Hezbollah and entrenched its clout in Iraq (see Map 1).⁽¹⁴⁾

Map 1: The Map of Iranian Clout in the Middle East



Source: The International Institute of Strategic Studies (IIS).

Tehran is basing its strategy on the fact that the military capabilities of the United States and its partners surpass its own. This prompted Iran to abandon the notion of confrontation in all the main defensive spheres, instead focusing on the loopholes in the enemy's defenses. Iran also works to counter threats on distant borders, thus creating a military front far away from its borders.⁽¹⁵⁾ On the basis of these strategic approximations, Iran has developed tactics such as establishing the "Axis of Resistance," which includes a host of organizations and movements aligned with Iran in different parts of the region. Iran has established partnerships with non-government formations in its neighboring countries and has also created allied structures such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, which have added an opportunistic element to Iranian foreign policy.⁽¹⁶⁾

In this context, we will shed light on a number of pillars on which Iran's strategy has been designed to deter its rival Israel and encircle its lebensraum in the region:

• **Enhancing the centrality of the Palestinian cause in Iranian rhetoric:** In its strategy to enhance clout and counter regional and global powers, Iran combines ideology and pragmatism. In the case of the Middle East, the Iranian ideological rhetoric supportive of the Palestinian cause — through confronting Western-American imperialism and manifesting hostility to Israel — assists in providing a cover for supporting proxy groups in Lebanon, Palestine and Syria.⁽¹⁷⁾ This rhetoric enhances the loyalties of these groups to Iran.

• **Enhancing the military capabilities of proxy actors in the context deterrence:** Iran is enhancing its military, particularly its missile arsenal and proxy actor capabilities throughout the region, to impose deterrence and counter US-Israeli clout. For instance, Iran provides the Lebanese Hezbollah with advanced weapons and missiles capable of striking deep into Israeli territory. This enabled Hezbollah to wage a costly war in 2006. Through the missiles it sent to Hezbollah, Tehran managed to deliver a message of deterrence to Tel Aviv, the core theme of which is that fighting with Tehran or Hezbollah will lead to massive losses for the Israeli home front.⁽¹⁸⁾ Currently, Hezbollah continues to enhance its military capabilities with the help of Iran though not according to its desired pace or scale. However, Hezbollah managed to increase its firepower capabilities, develop a high-precision missile program and enhance its acquisition of drones and air defense systems.⁽¹⁹⁾

In other words, Iran, through Hezbollah, managed to plug the gap between it and Israel, which possess cutting-edge technological capabilities. This explains why the Iranian leadership is viewing Lebanon and Hezbollah as

two strategically significant actors for Iran, since they represent a chief pillar in its “Forward Defense Strategy” adopted for deterring potential foes.⁽²⁰⁾ On the other side, Iran is balancing the distribution of military support between the Syrian and Lebanese fronts. Several Israeli reports indicate that Iran has established facilities for manufacturing and providing missiles in Syria, which is a strategic target for the pro-Iran axis in the region, given that it represents the chief hotspot of supplies for Hezbollah. The Iranian leadership argues that in case Iran did reach Syria, it would have spent more money on its national security to protect its borders, eventually grappling with the implications of the conflicts that erupted in Syria and Iraq.⁽²¹⁾

Overall, the Iranian approximation toward Syria and Lebanon serves as a basis for its military campaign, waged in collaboration with Hezbollah, against Israel. During peacetime, it includes efforts to enhance military capabilities through the domestic production and transfer of weapons from Syria to Lebanon. During wartime, the campaign depends on fighters and reservists in Lebanon with diverse military capabilities (firepower, special forces, maneuvering forces, ground-to-ground missiles, antitank missiles, cruise missiles and drones). This is in addition to the reserve forces in Syria to strengthen the front in Lebanon. As a result, “Tel Aviv is waging a military campaign on the two fronts, while recognizing the reciprocal influence of operations in Syria and in Lebanon,” according to INSS Strategic Analysis for Israel 2023.⁽²²⁾

• **Laying the foundation for a sustained military and societal presence:**

Iran seeks to bolster its military presence in its spheres of influence in the Shiite Crescent states. Over the past years, its military presence has been noticeably increasing through aligned armed groups or elements affiliated with the IRGC and Quds Force. According to some reports, Tehran dispatched advisors and personnel from the IRGC to Syria, with numbers ranging from hundreds to thousands.⁽²³⁾ It also mobilized approximately 20,000 fighters from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight in Syria.⁽²⁴⁾ In addition, Iran has carved out and enhanced its presence and clout within the Syrian army and local militias (the National Defense Forces (NDF) and Local Defense Forces (LDF) were established and trained by Iran).⁽²⁵⁾ There has been increasing Iranian interference in fields such as education and culture, as well as attempts to expand economic cooperation in the fields of energy, industry and trade.⁽²⁶⁾ This in addition to the influence exerted by Iranian proxies on the political balance of power in the three Shiite Crescent countries, thus undermining the possibility of establishing, maintaining and safeguarding national governments and systems.⁽²⁷⁾

Related to these moves to enhance its regional clout, Iran seeks extensive

influence and aims to create a foothold in Israel's neighboring countries through establishing what is known as the Shiite Crescent or the "Axis of Resistance," not to mention the stalled nuclear talks. All these changes have raised Israeli security concerns regarding Iran's capabilities that enhances its deployment of proxies to wage potential attacks against Israel. Tel Aviv now viewing Iran's presence close to it in Syria and Lebanon, as well as its support for the Palestinian resistance factions (Hamas and the Islamic Jihad) as the primary challenge facing its security on the northern, eastern and southern fronts. The security assessments of the Israeli security and military establishments opted for addressing the challenges through laying out scenarios for handling a war on multiple fronts. This was voiced by former Israeli Army Chief of Staff Aviv Kohavi in a speech he delivered on September 25, 2019, in which he identified Iran and some of its proxies as the chief source of threat to Israel. He also indicated that a collision with Iran is nearly inevitable, asserting that the army is preparing for such a scenario.⁽²⁸⁾ To achieve this end, Israel has adopted the "campaign between wars" (CBW) strategy which it announced in 2015. This is based on waging limited military campaigns with the aim of aborting threats and imposing deterrence while avoiding escalation and moving to the level of full-blown war.⁽²⁹⁾ This appeared in the continued strikes conducted by Tel Aviv in Syria and Iraq, expanding the geographical scope of its attacks on Iranian targets since 2019.⁽³⁰⁾ Yet there has been an escalation in the shadow war between the two sides, which has been raging over the past six years, particularly in 2021, with the scope of operations targeting the Red Sea basin. Iran and Israel mounted mutual attacks on commercial vessels in this context.⁽³¹⁾ Additionally, Tel Aviv has stepped up the targeted killing of major Iranian personalities working for Iran's military and nuclear complex such as the Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. Moreover, Israel helped Washington by providing basic intelligence that enabled Washington to take out Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, one of the IRGC's main extraterritorial arms.⁽³²⁾ There have also been some operations targeting the infrastructure of Iranian nuclear facilities, which appeared in the explosion at the Natanz nuclear site in the summer of 2020, which is believed to have been orchestrated by Israel's intelligence services.⁽³³⁾ This is in addition to the cyberattacks targeting Iran's nuclear installations, foremost of which was the Israeli cyberattack using the Stuxnet virus, which targeted the Natanz nuclear site in 2010.⁽³⁴⁾

Tel Aviv and Tehran — whose position toward each other has remained unchanged over the past years — know that an open warfare scenario will lead to excessive losses for both sides. Yet the chances of Israel carrying out a strike against Iran on its own, without assistance from the United States, are minimal due to the geographical challenges related to the distance separating the two countries. Reaching Iran requires a passage permit from several countries, in addition to fueling aircraft after taking

off from Tel Aviv.⁽³⁵⁾ It could be said that the prospect of an open warfare scenario remains unlikely, especially as the world powers (European countries plus Russia and China), and to a lesser degree Washington, are not supportive of this scenario. This has prompted Tel Aviv to develop low-cost confrontation strategies such as the CBW strategy and the shadow war, opting for enhancing deterrence and imposing pressures on Iran. Israel has taken advantage of the geopolitical changes experienced by Tehran's neighbors in the north —the South Caucasus nations — which are suffering from shatterbelts as a result of border disputes, such as the renewed dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia, in a way that allows Israel to infiltrate the region and find a foothold there. Israel is taking advantage of the fact that these countries are seeking to achieve balance among one another. Therefore, we find that there is Iranian-Armenian cooperation versus Azerbaijani-Israeli cooperation.

The Geopolitical Map of the South Caucasus and Central Asia and the Israeli Strategy to Encircle Iran

The geopolitical variables in the international arena at present, in terms of the cutthroat competition between major world powers as well as the global order shifting toward multipolarity, are overshadowing the geopolitical map of the regions at the heart of the scene of this competition such as the Middle East, the South Caucasus and Central Asia (see Map 2).

Map 2: The Caucasus and Central Asia



Source: M. K. Bhadrakumar, "Russia Consolidates Its Position as a Black Sea Power: The US, NATO and Geopolitics of the War in Georgia," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 6, no 9 (September 2008), accessed September 10, 2023,

According to the aforesaid Iranian vision to exploit these variables to enhance its regional clout and secure its security interests in the Middle East, particularly in the northern region bordering Israel, Tel Aviv seems to be seeking to pursue the same orientation, taking advantage of the geopolitical transformations in the northern part of the Iranian strategic region. Israel's aim is to achieve deterrence and undermine Iranian clout. Among the major variables on which Tel Aviv depends to implement its strategy in the region are the following:

• **The US intention to counter the Russo-Chinese clout:** In the context of current US efforts to enhance its security and preserve its standing as a dominant global power in light of the ensuing geopolitical changes connected chiefly to the Russo-Chinese rise, it is now working to expand its clout along the Russian flanks.⁽³⁶⁾ This is in addition to taking advantage of the geographical formations of the emergent geopolitical structures in these regions such as the shatterbelts arising from the border disputes of the countries neighbouring these regions. Therefore, the United States will help settle these regional disputes and support the balance of power to encircle its rivals (Russia and China) through alliances with their regional rivals.⁽³⁷⁾ The United States is leveraging the resistance on the part of Russia and China's neighbors to their expansionist clout to contain both revisionist powers. This would help create an encirclement (made up of nations) hostile to Russia and China and resistance to any further expansion plans.

Looking at the shatterbelts extending throughout the northern region of Iran's strategic neighborhood (in the South Caucasus and Central Asia), we find that the stimulus wars raging in these regions — foremost of which is the border dispute between Azerbaijan and Armenia — invite intervention on the part of outside strategic competitors such as Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran and Israel. This intervention comes following agreements with local rivals within their specific frameworks of attempting to counter the clout of the other.

This is evident at present through the US moves in the South Caucasus region, illustrated by the extensive US communications with senior officials from the two major disputing countries in the region (Armenia and Azerbaijan).⁽³⁸⁾ This is in addition to the important signs of cooperation at the military level. The Armenian Ministry of Defense announced on September 6, 2023, the launch of military drills with the United States dubbed "Eagle Partner 2023," which were conducted as scheduled on Armenian territory during the period from September 11-20, 2023.⁽³⁹⁾

These moves reflect the US approach that is modelled on the aforesaid checkerboard structure to support the balance of power against Russia in the South Caucasus region. The aim is to encircle Russia through forging close ties with its old ally Armenia and take advantage of the tensions en-

suing between Moscow and Yerevan, which is resulting from the growing Armenian awareness of the Russian abandonment of Armenia in its latest dispute with Azerbaijan.

• **The Azerbaijani-Armenian dispute:** The post-USSR sphere in the South Caucasus witnesses continuous tensions and escalations. Some shatterbelts associated with border disputes in these regions have emerged. Among these tensions are those between Abkhazia and Georgia, South Ossetia and Georgia Transnistria/Pridnestrovia and Moldova. The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory is at the forefront of these conflicts, with roots dating back to 1992 when the two sides fought their first war, which Armenia won. The conflict resurfaced in 2020 when Azerbaijan was able to regain control of the disputed region. It is worth noting that the signs of the conflict are still visible today as a result of Azerbaijan's efforts to impose a siege on the Lachin Corridor and force the Armenians to leave Artsakh/Nagorno-Karabakh by isolating them from Armenia.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This was revealed during Azerbaijan's military operation to combat terrorism, which began on September 19, 2023, and targeted Armenian forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh territory, according to its statement. The Armenian Ministry of Defense disputed this, stating that it had no forces in the region.⁽⁴¹⁾

As a result of the transformations in the nature of the dispute between the two sides and the balance of power tipped in favor of Azerbaijan, this has coincided with some geopolitical shifts. These shifts are mainly related to restoring the role of the outside strategic competitors after agreements with local competitors, with the aim of imposing balance between the two sides. This has in turn facilitated the enhancement of the Israeli presence via Azerbaijan because of Baku's reliance on Israeli technology such as military drones. According to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, during a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in 2016, he reiterated that Azerbaijan had purchased weapons worth \$5 billion from Israel, including drones and satellite systems.⁽⁴²⁾ In 2017, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute reiterated that Baku had purchased military technology from Israel worth \$127 million.⁽⁴³⁾

This is in addition to reports indicating that Israel has an arrangement with Azerbaijan that allows the former to conduct potential airstrikes beyond its borders.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Iran has also repeatedly claimed that Israel is using Azerbaijan as a base for gathering intelligence on Iran, even alleging that Israel has an espionage station in Azerbaijan.⁽⁴⁵⁾ In 2012, after the assassination of the nuclear physicist Mostafa Roshan, Iran accused Azerbaijan of aiding Israeli intelligence.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Iran also levelled similar accusations against Baku in October 2021.⁽⁴⁷⁾

At present, Azerbaijan is seeking to isolate Iran by controlling the

Zangezur Corridor (annexing the Syunik region), which will allow Baku to be directly connected to the autonomous Nakhichevan Republic, thereby impeding Iran's outreach to Armenia.⁽⁴⁸⁾ This is in addition to cutting it off from Russia and Europe, and even isolating it from the energy corridors in favor of the Turkish-Azerbaijani project.⁽⁴⁹⁾ According to a media platform affiliated with the IRGC, the so-called Zangezur Corridor will pass through Armenia's region of Syunik, thus blocking Iran from establishing its strategic linkage with Europe and Russia.⁽⁵⁰⁾

• **Turkish-Iranian competition:** Given the shifts in Turkey's foreign policy, with it ushering in the concept of strategic depth, Ankara seeks a stronger geopolitical engagement with the Middle East and other regions. This is currently actively applied in the South Caucasus and eastern Black Sea. Turkey is seeking to achieve more geopolitical clout through its growing military cooperation with Georgia and Azerbaijan. Recent ventures of cooperation, such as building an overland corridor that reaches the Caspian Sea and establishing stronger military and energy ties, will enhance Ankara's footprint in the eastern part of the Southern Caucasus.⁽⁵¹⁾

These Turkish moves raise Iran's concerns, which always believes that the enhanced Turkish presence in its strategic neighborhood undermines its clout. This has evidently appeared in recent years in the aftermath of the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020. Turkish interests have been enhanced along the northern borders of Iran through the signing of the so-called Shusha Declaration in June 2021 by the Turkish president and his Azerbaijani counterpart in a ceremony held in Shusha. According to the document, an attack on each of the two countries is considered an attack on both of them.⁽⁵²⁾

This is in addition to the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Turkey and Azerbaijan whereby the Turkish company BOTAŞ Petroleum Pipeline Corporation opened a tender for a pipeline to supply Nakhichevan with gas.⁽⁵³⁾ This supply route will curb Iranian gas sales to Azerbaijan.⁽⁵⁴⁾

From a regional perspective, Iran fears Turkey's push for the creation of an overland corridor reaching Azerbaijan and the Caspian Sea. Turkey's intervention and the possibility of reaching its sisterly republics in Central Asia would be a devastating development.⁽⁵⁵⁾ This comes especially following Azerbaijan's violation of the agreement signed on November 9, 2020. This violation took place on March 25, 2023, when Azerbaijani forces crossed the demarcation line in Shusha. The Azerbaijani army took control of several highlands between the villages of Gagzor and Zabukh in addition to a big region along the border.⁽⁵⁶⁾

This emerging competition between the two regional powerhouses, in which the balance of power in favor of Ankara is enhanced, represents a

new gateway for enhancing the Israeli presence in the region through Tel Aviv's growing cooperation with Ankara. Turkish-Israeli relations saw a thaw in August 2022. Both Israel and Turkey announced the normalization of relations and the exchange of ambassadors.⁽⁵⁷⁾ This development could assist in establishing a new axis of cooperation in the South Caucasus region, whose members are Turkey, Israel and Azerbaijan. This could also pose a geopolitical threat to Iranian clout in its lebensraum in the northern region.

• **Fraught Russia-Armenia relations:** Currently, there are tensions between the two traditional allies Armenia and Russia in the aftermath of the recent dispute in the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Armenia views the neutral Russian position toward the recent dispute as abandonment of it. It also believes that the Russian position has led to an imbalance of power between it and Azerbaijan, which emerged victorious as a result of Turkish-Israeli support. These changes have led to greater Armenian-Western cooperation, particularly with the United States. On September 6, 2023, military drills between Armenia and the United States, dubbed "Eagle Partners 2023," were launched. There were also other indications, such as the visit on the part of the Armenian premier to Kyiv along with the UN secretary general and the provision of humanitarian assistance.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Yet there have emerged several reports that speak of Armenia's intent to withdraw from the Eurasian Customs Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.⁽⁵⁹⁾

This has drawn Russia's ire, which summoned the Armenian ambassador and submitted a note of strong protest as a result of what the Russian statement described as unamicable steps taken in recent days. This included Yerevan's approval of Rome's statute of the International Criminal Court, given the timing of the Armenian recognition which followed the court's condemnation of Russia's President Putin and its call for arresting him.⁽⁶⁰⁾

These Armenian moves are chiefly associated with the central tenet of Yerevan's foreign policy, which is the pursuance of a multiparty foreign policy. Armenia has always considered its asymmetrical reliance on Russia a burden that curbs the country's ability to maneuver in an increasingly multipolar global order.⁽⁶¹⁾ This presents Tel Aviv with an opportunity to secure its presence in the international presence calculus equation of Yerevan, a traditional ally of Tehran, via the gateway of the United States.

• **Tense Azerbaijan-Iran relations:** Relations between the two sides are continuously tense. Tensions reached their peak when the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran was stormed on January 27, 2023, an incident in which an employee was killed and two others wounded.⁽⁶²⁾ As a result, the embassy's staff and their families were evacuated on January 29, 2023, which

is an additional proof of the deteriorated relations between the two sides. These tensions are rooted in several factors, foremost of which is the Iranian-Azerbaijani competition over oil resources in the Caspian Sea. Azerbaijan is preventing Iran from achieving its ambitions in the Caucasus.

Additionally, the Azeri minority living in Iran is one of the stimulants of tensions between the two sides.⁽⁶³⁾ The presence of the Azeri component in the Iranian demographic makeup is one of the sources of threat that Tehran fears could be exploited by Baku's international supporters such as Israel, Turkey and the United States to stir up secessionist disputes on its northern borders with Azerbaijan. This bargaining chip is used from time to time by Azerbaijan. In August 2022, several media outlets linked to the Azerbaijani presidential administration published articles and analyses claiming Baku had the right "reunite" with northern Iran.⁽⁶⁴⁾ It was remarkable when four of Ali Khamenei's representatives in Azerbaijan justified Baku's steps to reclaim Nagorno-Karabakh, saying it is "totally legal according to Sharia" and "complies with four decisions by the Supreme National Security Council." The Azeri minority and the competition with Azerbaijan over oil resources heighten Iran's concerns.⁽⁶⁵⁾

As a result of these tensions and Iran's attempt to establish a counterweight to Azerbaijan through supporting its foe Armenia, Israel has been able over the past years to establish a foothold in Baku. These indications have evidently emerged in the increasing military cooperation between the two countries and Tel Aviv's provision of advanced technologies and weapons to Baku⁽⁶⁶⁾ as well as elevating the level of diplomatic representation between the two countries. Azerbaijan opened a new embassy in Tel Aviv in March 2023 and Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov and his Israeli counterpart Eli Cohen in a press conference on March 29, 2023, mentioned that Israel and Azerbaijan share the threats posed by Iran, accusing Tehran of creating a state of instability.⁽⁶⁷⁾ This development increased tensions between Baku and Tehran. On April 5, 2023, up to 210 Iranian lawmakers issued a joint statement in which they condemned the Azerbaijani move to open an embassy in Tel Aviv and send an ambassador to Israel.⁽⁶⁸⁾

This is in addition to the reports speaking of Baku pledging to allow Tel Aviv to use its airports in case of carrying out any potential attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities. This is according to a report by the Israeli newspaper Haaretz in early March 2023,⁽⁶⁹⁾ which was denied by the Azerbaijani ambassador to Israel.⁽⁷⁰⁾

Iran accuses Azerbaijan of facilitating Israeli activities along its borders, saying that Israel is exploiting the South Caucasus republics as a springboard for regional aggression and espionage.⁽⁷¹⁾ In the aftermath of the attack carried out by Baku in September 2022 against Armenia, Iran

launched maneuvers on October 17, 2022, along the border with Azerbaijan dubbed “the Great Iran.”⁽⁷²⁾ These drills occurred within the framework of the Iranian military doctrine of deterrence to reflect Iran’s readiness to respond to any outside threat.

• **The Great Game strategy in Asia:** This strategy reflects the geopolitical changes resulting from the cutthroat competition between the major world powers, particularly the United States and China. The United States is seeking to counter Chinese clout in Asia through reliance on key countries in different geographical regions, especially in light of the strategic competition between the major world powers in these regions for dominance and clout in Central Asia. This comes in the context of the New Great Game, with a host of global actors vying for control and dominance over this region and its resources, particularly those located in the Caspian Sea, which contains huge resources of oil and gas.⁽⁷³⁾

According to the US strategy of reliance on key countries, it is working on establishing new frameworks for multiparty alliances, which could lay the groundwork for new regional orders and integrated efforts against foes.⁽⁷⁴⁾ These frameworks, in turn, provide Israel with an opportunity to infiltrate into these regions through forging alliances with key countries there under the patronage of the United States. This is evidently reflected in the I2U2 alliance that involves India, Israel, the UAE and the United States, which was established during the visit of US President Joe Biden to the Middle East in July 2022.⁽⁷⁵⁾ The United States seeks to establish frameworks for its allies so that they become the main actors rather than the United States itself.

Though the clear aim of such alliances is to assist in containing growing Chinese clout in Asia, they will also address the security concerns of allied partners, including those posed by Iran. Alliances enhance the defense capabilities of its members. This was illustrated by the deployment of the missile defense system Barak-8 in the UAE’s Al-Dhafra. And this is viewed as a clear strategic outcome of Israel-India-UAE cooperation.⁽⁷⁶⁾ It is expected that this cooperation and coordination will extend to other geographical regions including the South Caucasus.

These geopolitical shifts and aforesaid variables reflect the enhancement of Israeli infiltration into the geopolitical points of contact with Iran. The last of these efforts was Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen opening, during his visit to Turkmenistan, which shares a 1,200 kilometer borders with Iran, a new embassy on April 19, 2023.⁽⁷⁷⁾ Therefore, the geopolitical factor, which is the primary variable at present in the South Caucasus and Central Asia, helps Tel Aviv to achieve its objectives related to deterring Tehran, encircling it in its strategic vicinity and threatening its security interests.

The Future of the Dispute in Light of the Geopolitical Variables Between the Two Countries

The aforementioned shifts reflect the nature of crowd geopolitics in the Middle East, the South Caucasus and Central Asia as well as these regions' advanced positions regarding the accelerated changes in terms of the global distribution of power. The connection between the developments in the South Caucasus and the changing global order has revealed the reemergence of the region's deep bonds with the Middle East. The South Caucasus had been gradually isolated from the geopolitics of the Middle East since the establishment of Russian imperial rule in the region in the early 19th century.⁽⁷⁸⁾

This connection is evident in the extensive interventions on the part of regional powers in the South Caucasus region in the affairs of the Middle East. The deep interference on the part of Russia, Iran and Turkey in the Syrian crisis led to reverberations in the Southern Caucasus. In addition, Turkish reliance on energy supplies from the Caspian Sea has increased. The Second Nagorno-Karabakh War in 2020 showed that the region is deeply linked to Turkey and Iran, particularly within the frameworks of cooperation at times and competition at others. As a result, the decisions they adopted for the Middle East were indirectly linked to their decisions for the South Caucasus.

Here, it is worth noting that this link between the two regions; the Middle East and the South Caucasus, at the level of regional power interactions, is also related to the involvement of greater powers in the South Caucasus to facilitate a change in the balance of power. Each of these powers is seeking to gain a greater foothold in Eurasian geopolitics.⁽⁷⁹⁾ This means that their geopolitical vision for the South Caucasus will be directly linked to the developments in the Middle East and relations with the West and China, which is currently occurring, especially in the context of the United States working to retain some of the elements of its clout to ensure the flow of energy resources from the Caspian Sea into Europe through circumventing the Russian mainland.⁽⁸⁰⁾

According to these geopolitical realities, a geopolitical connection has emerged between the spheres of competition and dispute between Israel and Iran through the Middle East, the South Caucasus and the Middle East. This is within the framework of each of the two sides seeking to secure its interests while tightening the noose around the interests of the other. However, in light of these geopolitical changes experienced by the global order, as well as the regional order, the equation of the dispute between the two sides are subject to several scenarios, which could be summed up as follows:

- **Avoiding an open warfare scenario:** There is a growing awareness on the part of Tehran and Tel Aviv of the high cost the two sides would pay in

case they engaged in open warfare, especially in light of the internal challenges endured by each of them. Yet the variables of the regional and international geopolitical context are not ready for this scenario which would not be supported by any of the major world powers given the huge consequences for the stability of the global order and balance of power, making this scenario unlikely in the medium and long term. This comes especially in light of the failure of the attempts of Israeli politicians to prompt the United States to take the decision to wage all-out strikes against Iran. In addition, the US administration is inclined to resume dealing with Iran and reach a new nuclear deal. This makes it harder for Israel to exert pressure to take a firmer position toward Iran. As an alternative to this scenario, Tehran and Tel Aviv are resorting to the imposition of deterrence, sending mutual signals of deterrence through limited and tactical escalation which makes each of them understand the other's capabilities in case a dispute unfolds. This especially applies to Iran, which is well aware that if a war breaks out, it will be fighting against the United States, even if its direct foe in the war is Israel.

• **Continued geopolitical pressure and encirclement:** Both Iran and Israel have been working over the past years to develop strategies to impose pressures and geopolitical encirclement to the fullest in a way that achieves the desired deterrence without leading to open warfare. As part of the geopolitical changes experienced by the spheres of competition in which the two sides are involved, some developments have occurred, prompting each party to increase the effectiveness of the pressure on and encirclement of the other. For Israel, this has appeared in the development of its CBW strategy and the shadow war campaign it has been waging against Iran on the ground and at sea⁽⁸¹⁾ through carrying out continued military strikes against Iranian targets in Syria and Iraq. There have also been cyberattacks targeting the infrastructure of nuclear sites, not to mention the assassinations of nuclear scientists and military commanders. At the geopolitical level, Israel has worked to enhance the geopolitical encirclement of Iran through expanding ties with Iran's Arab neighbors in the region via the Abraham Accords. This is in addition to infiltrating into the geopolitical points of contact of the Iranian lebensraum in the region located at its northern borders. For doing so, Tel Aviv has developed ties with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan.

Conversely, Tehran is seeking to exert pressure against Tel Aviv through encircling it on several fronts and developing the so-called "chain of fire" around Israel, which Iran is encircling through its proxy actors in the Shiite Crescent states. Through this encirclement, Iran seeks to counter the clout and threat not only of Tel Aviv but also of the United States and its Arab allies in the region. Therefore, Iran seeks to push the potential arena

of confrontation away from its borders. At the geopolitical level, Iran is currently working on creating a counterweight to the Arab-Israeli agreements through ending all outstanding issues and cooling down tensions with its neighbors in the region. This appeared in the China-sponsored agreement to normalize relations with Saudi Arabia in April 2023.

• **Countering the clout between the two sides via the axes led by the major world powers:** As part of the Great Game strategy, in which the major world powers are jointly involved to counter the clout of rising powers, which appears evidently at present in the cutthroat competition between the United States and Russia and China, regional powers such as Iran and Israel are working to take advantage of this geopolitical development to enhance their room for maneuver. This is aimed to balance the strength and clout of each of them against the other via the axes led by the major world powers. For example, Tel Aviv is increasing its presence in some alliance frameworks being formed by the United States to counter Chinese clout such as the I2U2. Yet, Israel shall participate in the trade interconnection project announced by President Biden which will connect India to Europe and will pass through the Gulf states and Israel.⁽⁸²⁾ On the other side, Iran works to counter Israeli clout through the East axis made up of Russia and China. This evidently appears through the increasing cooperation and military support on the part of Iran to Russia in the Russia-Ukraine war. Additionally, Iran accepted the Chinese sponsorship of the normalization agreement with Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, Iran has expressed support for the regional organizations in Eurasia, which will be an alternative to the alliances and institutions led by the West, which comes in the context of enhancing regionalism to counter the clout of intervening outside powers.

Conclusion

The geopolitical variables experienced by the global order, and particularly the regional orders in the Middle East, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, impose dynamics that control and guide the direction of the dispute between Israel and Iran. These dynamics contribute to achieving the trichotomy of “imposing pressure, mutual deterrence and strategic encirclement” as an alternative to an open warfare scenario between the two sides. This helps the two sides to manage the dispute according to the pattern of “limited and tactical escalation” in the short and medium term. The US role currently helps maintain the status quo to provide some security guarantees for Israel and its regional allies through what could be called the Monroe Doctrine which first appeared in 1823. This doctrine is a declaration that aimed to prevent the creation of shatterbelts by any non-American actors in Central America. It called for driving out Eurasian forces intervening as rivals of the United States — the latter was concerned, back

then, that its rivals would be able to replace its spheres of influence in North America. The United States is presently seeking to curtail the implications of shatterbelts spreading throughout the Middle East to reassure its regional allies and counterbalance other intervening international powers, particularly the Iranian presence. This has recently appeared in US movements in the region, particularly in the Shiite Crescent regions where Iranian clout reigns supreme. Several reports have referred to these moves. For instance, an August 2023 report referred to movements by US forces stationed at Ain Al-Asad Airbase in the western Iraqi province of Anbar and its intent to close the borders with Syria. This has coincided with the arrival of US military reinforcements deployed deep within Syrian territory. Yet some reports have spoken of US military movements in the eastern and southern Yemeni provinces, a move that occurred in sync with the arrival of American and British vessels to the Red Sea. Furthermore, other reports stated that the US Congress has debated over providing the government of Kurdistan with antimissile and air defense systems to protect the region from Iranian shelling.

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