

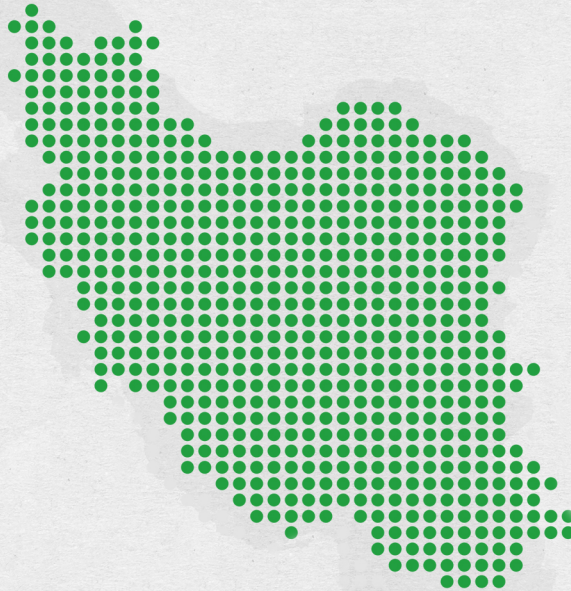
# JIS



## Journal for Iranian Studies

*Specialized Studies*

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual periodical Journal



Year 9, Issue 22, October 2025

22

- Warfare in the Age of AI
- Shifts in Israel-Iran Deterrence and the Ramifications on Regional Security
- The US-Iran Approach Toward Nuclear Talks After October 7
- Iran's Strategic Options in Syria After the Fall of Assad's Regime
- Iran's Foreign Policy Principles and the Rules of International Law: A Legal Study on Points of Conflict and Pathways for Adaptation
- Legislative Frameworks and Ecological Threats to the Red Sea
- Declining French Influence in the Sahel: Strategies and Repercussions



# **JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES**

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ISSUED BY



**RASANAH**  
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية  
International Institute for Iranian Studies

# JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

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# WARFARE IN THE AGE OF AI

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## **Abstract**

Militaries possess a strong bias for the latest technologies. Artificial intelligence (AI) is no exception, and an arms race for defense AI has been ongoing for over a decade. This has become more pronounced in recent years. The paper offers an outlook on AI's embrace by nation-states, from top-tier powers to disruptive ones. It delves into the prospect of humans being taken out of the decision-making loop and the manner in which defense AI challenges the role of government leaders and military commanders alike.

**Keywords:** AI, warfare, defense AI, cyber, security policy, decision-making, artificial general intelligence (AGI), Gaza war, Russia-Ukraine war.



## Introduction

Artificial intelligence is a natural evolution of scientific knowledge, which poses the age-old ethical and political challenges to the status quo. This study aims to review some of the notable applications of AI in warfare, sometimes referred to as Defense AI, and what policies various major powers are adopting in order to integrate AI in line with their respective values and national interests. For the most part, it delves into the manner in which the embrace of AI impacts the warfare and what role would be left for humans in the future. Abstruse questions intrigue and fascinate scientists and academics while corporations are hungry to earn every penny possible and politicians seek to amass more power. The challenge compounds further as advancements in AI gain ground.

The study, adopting realistic theory and analytical methods, examines three main topics: modern warfare in an AI environment, AI policies in the strategies of great powers and the riddle of AI in decision-making.

## Warfare in an AI Environment

War is like a chameleon which alters its color to the environment, wrote Carl von Clausewitz in his seminal treatise *On War*.<sup>(1)</sup> The objective of war does not change; nonetheless, its character, though, is contingent on the time, the capabilities and the operational environment of the parties involved. As with nuclear weapons, war has changed as much as its nature has remained the same, a continuation of politics by other means.<sup>(2)</sup> So will be the case in the era of AI as evidenced in the Russia-Ukraine war. In June 2025, Ukraine rewrote the rules of the game when its AI-enabled drones took out Russia's parked strategic bombers across the country's vast swaths. The audacious and elaborate attack cost the Kremlin around \$10 billion, diminishing its nuclear, offensive, conventional and surveillance capabilities. In the Middle East, Israel shielded itself from barrages of Iranian ballistic missiles and drones with AI-powered air defense systems, which manifested an extremely low failure rate. Since October 7, Tel Aviv has been deploying AI in an aggressive posture, vital to which remain its algorithmic systems, Lavender, Habsora and Gospel. By fault or intent, the AI-powered systems trained to track Hamas fighters have been far from accurate as they continued to pick civilian males, who were most certainly targeted after dark with their families. An Israeli soldier took 10 seconds to identify and approve the recommended targets.<sup>(3)</sup> "The machine did it coldly, and that made it easier," said one intelligence officer, explaining how people were targeted for bombardment in the Gaza war.<sup>(4)</sup>

As the examples illustrate, AI-enabled systems can be used to effectively and potently conduct offensive attacks against significantly powerful platforms, defend against sophisticated barrages of missiles as well as deliberately kill civilians alongside probable combatants.

Incremental advances in military technology and networking via internet, satellite and sophisticated intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR)

airborne platforms, resulting in data overload, necessitate efficient processing of information for quick and superior decision-making in the battlefield. The evolution of digital ecosystems has led to greater demand for superior data-processing power and autonomous decision-making platforms engaged in the kill chain. Militaries are tech-hungry by design and the quest for firepower is more prone to override ethical considerations. Hence, the race for Defense AI has been continuing without earnest multilateral agreement on its use. AI in warfare not only supplements tactical capabilities but can also yield strategic gains. In the context of the battlefield, AI-enabled systems are increasingly affordable, simpler and available, such as drones, land-based devices, dual-use gadgets and open-source cyber tools.

AI is a transformative force reshaping the battlefield today. AI-based algorithms, integrated within sophisticated networks, process and analyze information from a myriad of sources, which include, but are not limited to, radars, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), airborne early warning aircraft, satellites, electronic detection systems, intelligence agencies and even social media platforms.

Consider the radar data from multiple sources, for instance, a network of coastal radars, an airborne early warning aircraft and satellites. AI algorithms can harmonize it, eliminating redundancies and false positives, to present a clear, real-time picture of potential threats. Far beyond merely data processing, it is intelligence synthesis, a critical capability in today's complex threat environment.

AI can pilot UAVs, or drones, monitor their systems and make real-time decisions based on pre-programmed parameters. In real-time, AI analyzes the data these drones collect — from thermal imaging to high-resolution photography — identifying patterns and anomalies that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Airborne early warning aircraft and satellites, which constantly gather data from vast expanses, often in hostile environments are aided by AI not only to manage and analyze the information but also to alert operators to potential threats concurrently, for example, by detecting a sudden change in radio frequencies and warning the command instantly.

AI's role in command and control extends to the most crucial and controversial domain of decision-making. Does it just recommend a better course of action or actually decide on behalf of its operators? This is where leaders, commanders and theorists are starkly split. By continuously analyzing patterns, AI-enabled systems update potential courses of action, prompting decision-makers to take optimal courses. If the algorithm is adequately trained, it can make a difference in victory and defeat.

For air defense and ballistic missile defense, AI algorithms calculate the most effective combination of weapons and firing times without human intervention, optimizing resource use and ensuring a robust defense.

AI algorithms trained to counter cyberthreats mimic potential cyberattacks, discover system vulnerabilities and execute preventive measures in real-time.<sup>(5)</sup> AI can be used to develop unconventional weapons and cyberattacks, including

disabling military communications, manipulating satellite systems or disrupting power grids. This proactive approach to security can protect battlefield systems from a wide array of cyberattacks, deployed only after an extensive testing process. Moreover, AI supercharges online echo chambers, spreading disinformation and encouraging scapegoating. Its use in cyberattacks will likely become more pervasive and harder to detect.

Advanced natural language processing (NLP) — which is vital for large language models (LLMs) — and deep learning are enabling the creation of sophisticated deepfakes, posing significant risks.<sup>(6)</sup> AI-powered disinformation can provoke international conflicts, fabricate diplomatic crises or incite civilian panic.

AI is projected to become a strategic asset transforming military operations, decision-making and commanders' roles and workload. Defense AI is fundamentally reshaping military operations by assuming the roles of enabler, disrupter and force multiplier. Its ability to enable autonomous weapons systems and provide real-time data analysis is revolutionizing decision-making, enhancing situational awareness and improving mission outcomes. While AI's potential in human-machine teaming and decision support is empowering military leaders with better-informed choices, it also creates grim ethical dilemmas regarding compliance with the Geneva Conventions, the UN Charter<sup>(7)</sup> and international humanitarian law.

The specter of global transition from computer-assisted operations to AI-enabled or -executed functions at scale has led to the emergence of three schools of thought: enthusiasts, deniers and pragmatics.<sup>(8)</sup> AI enthusiasts argue that AI will transform warfare by empowering autonomous systems and enhancing data analysis, increasing the pace of combat operations and reducing uncertainty, potentially revolutionizing the nature of war and geopolitics. Deniers argue that AI's immaturity, data scarcity and black box problem significantly limit its military utility and impact on the nature of a war.<sup>(9)</sup> Organizational hurdles, like the need for AI's integration into broader contexts and structures, further slow its adoption. Conversely, AI might increase battlefield uncertainty and "fog," potentially undermining the advantages it offers. Clausewitzian traditionalists and pragmatics agree that AI's military impact is evolutionary, not revolutionary.<sup>(10)</sup> Pragmatics focus on AI's potential at tactical and operational levels in uncontested environments, emphasizing its data analysis, predictive and automated capabilities, while acknowledging risks from adversarial attacks. International politics and institutional factors may significantly influence AI adoption, and while it can assist in strategy development as a "strategic counsellor," it remains a human-led endeavor.<sup>(11)</sup>

### **AI in the Security Policy of Major Powers**

In its 2017 national strategy paper titled "New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan," China underscored the critical importance of AI technology, classifying it as a strategic capability.<sup>(12)</sup> China's deployment of Defense AI

particularly aims to enhance situational awareness in realms of better intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). China is focusing on seven key areas: intelligent vehicles, intelligence and surveillance, predictive maintenance, electronic warfare, simulation, command and control and automated target recognition.<sup>(13)</sup> The categorization linked to Beijing's broader ambition to become a global leader in AI by 2030 is being realized with stunning innovation and complemented with fast-food-style assembly lines. For instance, China has developed the Feiyi, the world's first autonomous drone capable of operating both in the air and underwater. Named after a Chinese cryptid, it launches from a submarine, concealing its travel beneath the surface before ascending for surveillance or AI-driven tasks.<sup>(14)</sup> China is developing various systems like the FH-97A. These are answers to the United States' loyal wingman, in which one or more autonomous aircraft follow and assist as a team (swarm) with a crewed aircraft.<sup>(15)</sup> The People's Liberation Army (PLA) deployed an AI-powered robot dog at their Golden Dragon joint military drills in Cambodia in 2024, months ahead of the US Army which sent its own killer robo-dog — Quadrupedal-Unmanned Ground Vehicle (Q-UGV) — to the Middle East for evaluation.<sup>(16)</sup>

With its massive innovation-powered IT sector and vast defense budget, the United States remains an IT superpower with a significant margin, though it is faced with a fast-advancing near-peer. Wary of losing its lead, Washington keeps refining its regulations, organizational hierarchy, AI-integration command, decision-making and battlefield deployment processes as envisioned in its Joint All-Domain Command and Control Strategy.<sup>(17)</sup> Since LLMs are vital for data centric warfare, the US Army has contracted with Scale AI for its platform Donovan to assist with Joint All-Domain Command and Control.<sup>(18)</sup> According to the Pentagon's Third Offset Strategy, the superiority to be maintained must be at par with nuclear weapons and long-range precision strike capabilities.<sup>(19)</sup> Building on previous guidelines, the US Congress resolved in 2017 that the United States must pioneer AI technology in order to maintain its dominant military power. Like the Cold War era and because of the secrecy of China's AI investments and designs, the United States is gearing up innovation, development and integration in fear of losing the race. The Pentagon is banking heavily on Project Maven, which was conceived to pave the way for wider use of AI-enabled technologies that can autonomously detect, tag and track objects or humans of interest from still images or videos captured by surveillance aircraft, satellites and other means. Originally launched in 2017, the project's responsibilities were split among the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, the Pentagon's Chief Digital and AI Office and the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security.<sup>(20)</sup> Already, the US military has earmarked a \$36 billion overhaul of its forces for increased reliance on lethal autonomous weapon systems (LAWS). NATO aspires to build a "drone wall" on its eastern borders — extending more than 1,800 miles from Norway to Poland — against Russia.

Bogged down in Ukraine, Moscow's urgency for AI applications in the military is largely dictated by Kyiv. Russia's military doctrine on AI use is not as articulated as China's but experts deduce that it centers on information warfare as a pivotal tool. The Kremlin's strategy emphasizes AI's potential in shaping information at the strategic level, hence, leveraging disinformation to influence politics and societies. AI-enabled psychological warfare aims to create large-scale chaos for adversaries by manipulating narratives to influence societies and create instability through algorithmic disinformation and cyber disruptions. In its military doctrine, cyberwarfare is under the domain of information warfare. To make up for its deficiency in the latest technologies and weak supply chain for sophisticated military hardware, Russia may also opt for the deployment of its Defense AI in disabling an adversary's command-and-control systems to use hybrid combat weapons. The Russian military banks on a heavily encrypted network of computers powered with AI-enabled codebreaking to hack, disable or disorient an adversary's military equipment and decision-making ability.<sup>(21)</sup>

According to the French Defense Strategy Document, AI systems are prioritized as must have systems for superiority in the field of operations.<sup>(22)</sup> The French Armed Forces Ministry has established a ministerial committee named the Defense Artificial Intelligence Coordination Unit (CCIAD) to address ethical issues and coordinate AI integration while fostering strategic partnerships and facilitating industrial upscaling to leverage cutting-edge AI research for military and civilian applications.<sup>(23)</sup> While France is not holding itself back from deploying Defense AI, it aspires to champion the technology's regulation in military applications.<sup>(24)</sup> Given the fractured nature of great power relations and an active, all domain war in Ukraine imposed by Russia, the chances of AI regulation and agreement for AI arms control are grim.

Iran and North Korea, Russia's allies and disruptors, follow the peer's lead in resorting to AI to achieve low-cost, high-impact military outcomes in order to make up for their financial and technological constraints. Tehran has long pursued Defense AI and exaggerated its capabilities before they were exposed in Ukraine, as well as repeated skirmishes with Israel, finally culminating in the 12-Day War. Yet, Iran, as well as North Korea, have successfully used AI in cyberattacks. Though Iran maintains a more boisterous image-building policy to establish a semblance of deterrence, North Korea's AI landscape is shrouded in mystery. Yet, from the available information through leaks and its military exercises, it can be safely concluded that it is actively applying AI and machine learning (ML) in sensitive areas such as wargaming and surveillance.<sup>(25)</sup>

Other more mainstream players like Germany, Türkiye, Pakistan, India and South Korea are steadily integrating AI systems within their respective militaries in relation to their peculiar threat-perception scenarios. Their pursuit of Defense AI appears to be defensive in nature as the above-mentioned states have to feverishly project deterrence. Israel has been deploying AI-powered systems against civilians as well as ambiguous targets, leading to an overwhelming number of

casualties, which may prompt other adversaries and major powers to abandon restraint on technology's integration within their offensive platforms.

### **The Riddle of Decision in Making Defense AI**

Of the three broad categories of autonomous weapons systems: human in the loop systems, human on the loop systems and human out of the loop systems, the system without any human oversight has not been fielded yet. Notwithstanding its various potential benefits and absence of global regulations, leaders and commanders are reluctant to relinquish oversight.

"When we think about nuclear enterprise and our nuclear capabilities, as well as the assured communications that we absolutely have to have, we have to have a human in the loop. As good as AI is, as good as computer processes and things like that could be, it's really only as good as the data that is fed into it," according to US Space Force Colonel Ryan Rose.<sup>(26)</sup>

The problem of trust and fear of miscalculation cannot be solved easily and soon.<sup>(27)</sup> Where a human pilot, tank or missile battery commander would be sceptical to fire, LAWS — confident of their safety, accuracy and information — would not hold back.<sup>(28)</sup> Besides, the autonomous systems' decision-making is unintelligible to humans unlike other training simulators or training manuals they use. Such a lack of transparency leads to doubts and suspicion over the autonomy of AI systems. Besides, the training of algorithms has yet to include numerous unexpected scenarios. A widely quoted instance sums up the challenge succinctly: lightly camouflaged personnel could not be detected by an AI-powered security system of US Marines.<sup>(29)</sup> During the 12-Day War, Israel's air defense systems misfired at hostile projectiles in some instances while US Aegis and Patriot systems also targeted unintended objects.<sup>(30)</sup>

Even if the systems' algorithm, accuracy and sustainability can be relied upon, the specter of adversaries' countermeasures, which may include adversarial AI, poisoning and conflicting the info-sphere, could lead to adverse unforeseen consequences.<sup>(31)</sup>

Such attacks meddle with the data pool, input features or change data labels in the algorithm's training phase, which is akin to system poisoning. It can also happen through publicly available information sources ranging from the likes of Wikipedia, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. Thus, there is an urgent need for the creation of dedicated databanks for the military.<sup>(32)</sup> An absolutely objective and unbiased AI system is nearly impossible; hence, autonomous decision-making would inherently carry elements of mistrust amongst its employers.

"You know, in WarGames, it has this machine called the WOPR (War Operation Plan Response, pronounced 'whopper'). So, the WOPR actually was that AI machine that everyone is scared of. And guess what? We do not have, you know, a WOPR in STRATCOM headquarters. Nor would we ever have a WOPR in STRATCOM headquarters," US Air Force General Anthony Cotton, head of US Strategic Command (STRACOM), said in October 2024.<sup>(33)</sup>



Even if Defense AI is deployed, the chances of conflict increase exponentially due to either side's assessment of self-superiority. Perception of possessing a disproportionate benefit over the adversary sets the course for offense to exploit first-mover advantage.<sup>(34)</sup> It is nearly impossible for one side to exactly assess the other side's Defense AI and fairly assume parity or inferiority. The first-mover advantage is an incentive enough to start a war unless the adversary is relaying in detail its deterrent parity.

The future of Defense AI is a reality but what is not certain is the extent to which humans, heads of state and commanders would rely upon it. Gradually, the technology is advancing to Generative AI, which may lead to various tedious, vital but not extremely sensitive tasks being performed by machines, such as planning of routes and writing of operation orders. However, the military structures, hierarchies and their standard operating procedures (SOPs) tend to be overly complex. Integrating them into AI capabilities would further fatigue the trust matrix. The militaries evolve slowly; hence, doctrinal, hierarchical, structural and operational shifts are confronted with institutional and cultural biases and resistance. Since all of this would be happening for the first time at a swifter pace than the military is accustomed to, the question of trained and trusted manpower creates a separate imbroglio.<sup>(35)</sup>

Yet another dilemma confronting the transition is the gulf between strategy and its first contact with battlefield reality. Palantir and other AI drivers demonstrate their technologies in a serene and calm battlespace where the adversary is predictable as well as inferior. The noise and chaos of war create their own ground realities, which AI is too new to factor in, at least for now.<sup>(36)</sup> Digital poisoning, adversarial AI and fog of systems can bring forth unforeseen consequences and grave outcomes.<sup>(37)</sup>

Unlike the Cold War, private technology corporations are leading innovation and mass production. In the age of techno-feudalism, the military establishments are catching up to technological advancement, too slow to grasp and regulate but rather to bend and adapt. The case studies of the Russia-Ukraine war, Israel's military assault in Gaza and the policies adopted by the United States, China, Russia and other major and some disruptive powers exhibit one commonality: submission to AI.

## **Conclusion**

In today's world, polarized along political, economic and ethnic axes, unleashing free-range Defense AI could upend the global order. It might create a perception of inadequacy, rather than parity, fostering distrust and hyper-nationalism, reminiscent of the uncertainty of the 1960s. Driven by scientific innovation and ideological polarization, the chance of an AI arms race leading to pragmatism seems slim until respective adversaries can see each other's capabilities with relative clarity.

With only a handful of global arms control agreements still in place, the prospect of Defense AI altering the rules of the game could not be brighter. Since technological advancements are still a few years away from achieving Artificial general intelligence (AGI), perhaps half a decade, there remains a slim silver lining. Technology companies, scientists and academics continue to explore solutions to challenging questions. Meanwhile, heads of state, grand strategists or generals could engage in negotiations. As someone who negotiated the world out of a nuclear war once said, “Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate.”<sup>(38)</sup> And a Soviet visionary who signed nuclear arms limitation treaties to end the Cold War proposed, “What we need is Star Peace and not Star Wars.”<sup>(39)</sup> Owing to such statesmen, the world did not have to face the reality of nuclear or “Star Wars.”



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# SHIFTS IN ISRAEL-IRAN DETERRENCE AND THE RAMIFICATIONS ON REGIONAL SECURITY

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## Abstract

This study examines the changes in Israeli-Iranian deterrence strategies following the 12-Day War, which erupted on June 13, 2025, and their impact on regional security. The region was already grappling with numerous security challenges following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023, which Israel exploited not only to retaliate against Hamas but also to weaken the Iran-backed “Axis of Resistance.” Israel succeeded in demolishing the Gaza Strip and curbing Hezbollah’s capabilities through a truce that temporarily removed it from the conflict, while the fall of the Assad regime in Syria further bolstered Israel’s dominance. Meanwhile, the Houthis continued their threats against Israel. The Israeli-Iranian confrontation (June 2025) revealed shifts in deterrence strategies, notably a transition from covert, indirect methods to overt, direct engagement, with both sides demonstrating the ability to penetrate each other’s territory and implement deterrence in practice. The study concludes that these shifts in deterrence have inflicted significant damage on regional security, encouraging states to pursue deterrent weapons to safeguard their threatened security. Furthermore, these changes have directly threatened Gulf security, violated Qatar’s national sovereignty and endangered maritime corridors and global energy security.

**Keywords:** Israel-Iran war, deterrence, regional security, strategic hedging.

## **Introduction**

As the United States and Iran prepared for a sixth round of nuclear talks on June 15, 2025, Israel carried out surprise strikes on Iran on June 13, triggering a 12-day exchange in which Iran hit back to restore a deterrent balance. The backdrop was steadily rising tensions, with an Israeli aim to deliver a decisive blow amid the erosion of Tehran's proxies and allies and Israeli discontent over the trajectory and outcomes of US-Iran nuclear negotiations. After five inconclusive rounds, Israel judged the moment ripe for preemptive attacks to cripple Iran's nuclear infrastructure and impede its regional ambitions. Iran rapidly answered back by striking Israel's core, causing severe losses, prompting direct US intervention against Iranian nuclear sites and the imposition of a ceasefire.

Although the fighting halted after Iran's strike on Al Udeid Air Base, it exposed a reconfigured deterrence equation between Israel and Iran with far-reaching security repercussions. The study probes these strategic shifts and their regional effects through a comparative analytical lens, structuring the inquiry around four topics: the regional security landscape, prewar deterrence features, wartime transformations in deterrence and the ensuing regional implications.

## **A Sketch of the Pre-war Regional Security Reality**

### **Operation Al-Aqsa Flood**

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, which resulted in the capture of some Israeli settlements for a period of time, the killing of 1,300 people, the wounding of about 3,000 and the capture of 200 people.<sup>(1)</sup> Israel quickly responded with Operation Iron Swords, invading the Gaza Strip, completely destroying its infrastructure and killing more than 67,000 Palestinians by the beginning of October 2025.<sup>(2)</sup>

Several regional actors moved to de-escalate the crisis and halt hostilities. Their efforts initially produced limited, time-bound agreements that enabled small exchanges of detainees and captives on both sides, but all later attempts to secure a broader cessation of fighting failed.<sup>(3)</sup>

Operation Al-Aqsa Flood exposed serious vulnerabilities in Israel's deterrent posture. Therefore, in its response, Israel raised the cost of the conflict with Hamas and launched a military campaign that disregarded humanitarian considerations, including cutting off food and fuel to the population.<sup>(4)</sup> Israel's goal in its campaign was to impose a siege on the Gaza Strip, displace its people southward toward the Egyptian border and block the entry of aid and supplies. In a later phase, it sought to eliminate Hamas entirely and tighten the blockade after storming Rafah and taking control of the Philadelphi Corridor.<sup>(5)</sup>

The Israeli military did not simply aim to degrade Hamas' capabilities; it sought to dismantle the broader Iranian-led "Axis of Resistance" and to impose new rules of engagement designed to end, or at least diminish<sup>(6)</sup> Iran's regional

reach. It also tried to leverage the war as a chance to reshape the political and security order of the Middle East.<sup>(7)</sup>

### **Curbing Hezbollah's Capabilities**

In line with Iran's "unity of arenas" strategy, Hezbollah moved to assist Hamas by firing rockets from southern Lebanon into northern Israel, compelling the Israeli government to evacuate those border communities. Israel, in turn, mounted offensive operations that devastated swaths of southern Lebanon up to Beirut's southern suburbs, causing thousands of Lebanese deaths, and targeted senior Hezbollah figures for assassination.<sup>(8)</sup>

Israel moved beyond a posture of limited engagement and escalated its strikes on Hezbollah and across Lebanon. As a consequence, Hezbollah suffered substantial losses in manpower and key military capabilities, including after the detonation of the group's pagers and disabling of its walkie-talkies. More than 50 fighters were killed.

The Israeli military also assassinated Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in an airstrike on Beirut's southern suburbs on September 27, 2024. On October 24, Israel killed Hashem Safieddine, the head of the party's Executive Council and widely viewed as Nasrallah's likely successor. Israeli forces further advanced into Hezbollah strongholds such as Khiam, Shamaa and Bint Jbeil, claiming significant battlefield successes.<sup>(9)</sup>

Israel refined its approach to force Hezbollah out of the fight, secure a ceasefire and press for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 (2006).<sup>(10)</sup> A truce took effect on November 27, 2024, requiring Hezbollah to redeploy north of the Litani River and Israeli forces to pull back from southern Lebanese villages that they had entered by November 25, 2024.

The terms included the deployment of the Lebanese Army and UN peacekeepers to south of the Litani River to stabilize the ceasefire. As a result, Hezbollah stepped back — perhaps only temporarily — from the conflict equation and suspended its support for Hamas.<sup>(11)</sup>

### **The Fall of Syria's Assad**

Separately, the Syrian regime collapsed following an opposition offensive led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham beginning on November 27, 2024. The opposition rapidly seized Aleppo, Hama and Homs, entering Damascus on December 8, 2024, and President Bashar al-Assad fled after critical allies could no longer secure his rule.<sup>(12)</sup>

The collapse of the Syrian regime constitutes a major strategic setback for Iran. Syria had served as a core pillar of Iran's "forward defense doctrine," an anchor in the so-called Shiite Crescent, and a critical node in Tehran's regional corridor. It enabled the projection of influence and the movement of material from Iran to Hezbollah.

The withdrawal of Iranian forces — and with them, Iranian leverage — from Syria has therefore undermined Tehran's deterrent posture. In particular, it has

fractured the Syria-Lebanon axis that underpinned Iran's strategy of depth and indirect deterrence.<sup>(13)</sup>

Israel recognized the strategic upheaval unfolding in Syria and moved to occupy the emerging vacuum. The first consequence was its declaration that the 1974 disengagement framework had collapsed, followed by the seizure of Mount Hermon in the occupied Golan Heights and control of the adjacent UN-patrolled buffer zone. The area spans roughly 235 square kilometers and extends about 15 kilometers into Syrian territory, where peacekeepers had been deployed.<sup>(14)</sup>

Israel also executed more than 200 missile strikes that severely degraded Syria's military and strategic infrastructure. The country's new President Ahmed al-Sharaa stated that Syria would not enter another war and that its current condition precluded new conflicts. In effect, Syria was removed from the arena of regional contests and alliances.<sup>(15)</sup>

### **Mounting Houthi Threats**

The conflict in Yemen produced a key outcome in 2016: the Houthis consolidated control over the country's western coastline facing the Red Sea and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, a critical global maritime chokepoint. Iran, which views the Houthis as an integral component of its regional axis, has supplied them with advanced missile and drone capabilities. These systems allow long-range strikes and enable persistent threats to commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Such developments align with Iran's broader strategic objectives and support its management of confrontation with regional and international actors.<sup>(16)</sup>

Following the outbreak of Israel's war in Gaza, the Houthis adopted the "unity of arenas" strategy in solidarity with Hamas. On October 19, 2023, they launched missiles and drones toward Israel's heartland and, for several weeks, continued sporadic, low-impact strikes in the direction of Eilat. By November 2023, the campaign shifted toward maritime disruption, targeting Israeli-linked commercial vessels transiting the Red Sea and ships believed to be carrying aid to Israel.<sup>(17)</sup>

The Houthis progressively widened the geographical scope of their operations. They began by striking vessels transiting the Bab al-Mandab Strait, then mounted attacks to ships in the Red Sea and subsequently to targets in the Gulf of Aden. In March 2024, the group declared plans to broaden targeting further to include ships bound for Israel in the Indian Ocean en route to the Cape of Good Hope.<sup>(18)</sup>

On December 19, 2023, Washington announced a US-led maritime coalition in the Red Sea, commonly referred to as Operation Prosperity Guardian, with the UK and other partners joining to protect commercial navigation and counter Houthi threats. On February 19, 2024, the European Union launched Operation Aspides as a parallel naval mission to safeguard shipping in the Red Sea, deter and disrupt Houthi attacks on vessels and uphold freedom of navigation. The United States also redesignated the Houthi movement as a terrorist organization, signaling a sharpened coercive approach alongside maritime protection efforts.



Houthis stated that any halt to their attacks was contingent on ending Israel's war in Gaza, linking maritime escalation to developments in the war on Gaza.<sup>(19)</sup>

### **Overview of Pre-war Deterrence Strategies**

Prior to their confrontation, both Israel and Iran operated according to defensive strategies and a calculated approach. The features of the deterrence strategies of both sides can be outlined as follows:

#### **Iran's Strategy**

For over two decades, Iran's regional deterrence model relied on the concept of forward defense, aiming to expand its strategic depth by building a network of proxies — primarily non-state actors — dubbed the “Axis of Resistance:” Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in Syria and the Houthis in Yemen. This is in addition to strategic alliances, such as the one with the Assad regime in Syria. The objective of this model was to keep any military confrontation with Israel and the United States as far away from Iranian territory as possible.<sup>(20)</sup>

Prior to Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, Iran sought to bolster its regional influence by deepening ties with the “Axis of Resistance” and employing the so-called “unity of arenas” strategy, under which the axis would collaborate if any member was attacked, with the primary aim of deterring Israel and the United States.

In parallel, Iran adjusted its posture toward the Gulf states and responded to the Chinese-brokered diplomatic initiative to restore relations with Saudi Arabia, viewing this as a way to ease economic pressures and mitigate regional isolation. Thus, Iran's strategy combined two tracks: engagement and diplomacy with Gulf partners, alongside efforts to strengthen power projection, deterrent capacity and forward defense against the United States and Israel.<sup>(21)</sup>

Faced with the serious deterioration of the “Axis of Resistance,” Iran was compelled to reassess its strategy and redirect its security focus inward, prioritizing the strengthening of national defense capabilities. This revised approach included dispersing key missile and nuclear infrastructure, constructing multilayered air defense systems, developing fortified command-and-control bunkers and enhancing domestic cyber defense capacities. Consequently, Iran's strategic depth contracted from an external buffer to a primarily domestic defensive deterrent.<sup>(22)</sup>

#### **Israel's Strategy**

For the past 75 years, Israel's security strategy has rested on a triad deterrence, early warning and decisive defeat (*hachra'a*) — defined as a swift and absolute triumph. In 2015, a fourth principle of defense was added, emphasizing missile defense, the Iron Dome, and the protection of the border fence. However, Operation Al-Aqsa Flood exposed the failure of this strategy: Hamas was not deterred, the early warning system did not anticipate the assault and the campaign against Gaza did not achieve a rapid victory.<sup>(23)</sup>



As such, Israel's security doctrine underwent significant transformations following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. A fundamental shift occurred in elite threat perceptions, with the attack framed as an existential challenge to the state. Core concepts such as *blitzkrieg* and qualitative superiority were extensively revised, while the army prioritized restoring deterrence and imposing a new reality in Gaza and southern Lebanon through the unrestrained use of force unconstrained by legal or ethical limits. This shift entailed dispensing with sensitivity to Israeli human or economic losses, including a diminished willingness to negotiate for prisoners held by Hamas.<sup>(24)</sup>

Accordingly, Israel pursued a new strategy: the proactive engineering of regional security networks. This approach sought to reshape the regional security system through an advanced model centered on controlling security vulnerabilities. It also aimed to assert comprehensive control over the operational environment across the Middle East and to neutralize emerging threats.<sup>(25)</sup>

In addition, Israel placed greater emphasis on layered air defenses — the Iron Dome, David's Sling and Arrow-3 (Hetz 3) — providing multi-tier interception against short-range projectiles and advanced ballistic missiles. Attack-drone and cyber capabilities, already core strengths, assumed greater weight and saw wider operational use. Coupled with military coordination with the United States, this posture aims to defend more effectively while simultaneously preempting and dismantling hostile networks.<sup>(26)</sup>

Given the balance of power in its favor and amid Iran's inward turn in military doctrine, Israel saw an opportunity to neutralize Tehran's regional influence and to shape security arrangements that preclude the reemergence of an alternative axis. In effect, Israel is working methodically to engineer a new regional order in which it functions as a dominant security node, setting rules of engagement and managing the balance of power across multiple fronts.<sup>(27)</sup>

### **Changes to Deterrence Strategies**

The direct confrontation between Israel and Iran began in 2024, with missile exchanges in April and October marking pivotal turning points and a shift in the rules of engagement. Israel's strike on the Iranian consulate building in Syria prompted Iran's first direct military attack on Israel on April 13, 2024, dubbed True Promise. On April 19, Israel reportedly struck an IRGC air base in Isfahan. Iran denied the attack occurred, and Israel did not officially claim responsibility.

Iran also launched hundreds of ballistic missiles at Israeli cities and sites on October 1, 2024, in Operation True Promise 2, framing it as retaliation for the killings of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, Hamas Political Bureau Chief Ismail Haniyeh and an IRGC commander. On October 26, 2024, Israel responded with airstrikes against Iran's air defense systems, military facilities and ballistic-missile production sites, though the damage was limited and largely symbolic.<sup>(28)</sup>

The most significant shift in Israel's initiative came with its June 13, 2025, attack, codenamed Operation Rising Lion. The operation sought to destroy Iranian

air defenses and missile capabilities, strike multiple air bases, assassinate several IRGC commanders and prominent nuclear scientists.<sup>(29)</sup> It also targeted facilities of Iran's nuclear program — including Natanz, Fordow, Parchin and Arak — as well as ballistic missile manufacturing and launch sites, drone production facilities and other strategic assets.<sup>(30)</sup>

For its part, Iran responded with three successive waves of ballistic missiles that directly targeted Israeli infrastructure and caused casualties. The strikes hit strategic urban centers, including Tel Aviv and Haifa, exposing vulnerabilities in Israel's air defenses — particularly the Iron Dome and Arrow systems.<sup>(31)</sup> They also inflicted significant damage on the economy, tourism and education sectors, and marked a qualitative shift by demonstrating Iran's capacity to hit strategically valuable targets inside Israel.<sup>(32)</sup>

Thus, it can be said that this war shattered many established rules in Israeli-Iranian conflict strategies, which are discussed below.

### **Bringing the Confrontation Out Into the Open**

The conflict has shifted from covert confrontation to open warfare, moving from proxy battles and third-country arenas to direct clashes. Iran, long reliant on its regional proxy network in its struggle with Israel, has been deprived of key external defenses by recent regional developments, compelling it to respond with direct military operations. What had been a shadow war has thus become an overt confrontation.<sup>(33)</sup> In essence, deterrence through ambiguity has given way to explicit confrontation.<sup>(34)</sup>

### **Striking the Core**

The recent war demonstrated each side's capacity to strike deep within the other's territory. For Israel, it marked the first major confrontation fought not at the periphery but inside its heartland, with attacks reaching major cities and targeting strategic capabilities and sensitive sites. This stands in contrast to prior conflicts largely confined to Gaza, the West Bank, southern Lebanon, Syria and Yemen.<sup>(35)</sup> At the same time, Israeli operations penetrated deep into Iran, hitting elements of its leadership and strategic infrastructure.<sup>(36)</sup> The confrontation also showcased both countries' ability to launch hundreds of missiles and drones against the other's heartland.<sup>(37)</sup>

### **US Unprecedented Support for Israel**

The United States extended substantial support to Israel by deepening missile defense cooperation and redeploying key naval assets to deter Iran and its regional allies. This included the deployment of the USS Nimitz carrier strike group to the Arabian Gulf in June 2015. Washington also engaged in a diplomatic ruse against Iran prior to the conflict, maintaining the semblance of preparing for a sixth round of negotiations scheduled to be held in Ankara, even as Israel's military preparations were already progressing in full swing.<sup>(38)</sup> The most consequential form of US support, however, came through direct military intervention: the

delivery of 12 bunker-buster bombs targeting the Fordow nuclear facility, two missiles targeting the Natanz nuclear site and Tomahawk cruise missile strikes on the Isfahan nuclear complex.<sup>(39)</sup>

### **Actual Deterrence**

Operation Rising Lion was Israel's attempt to dismantle Iran's strategic infrastructure. In military theory, this pattern is identified as a major opening attack — a tactic employed at the outset of a conflict to break the adversary's will and cripple its ability to coordinate an effective response. The operation, however, failed to fully meet its objectives, as Iran absorbed the initial blows and responded forcefully through a strategy of cost deterrence — making aggression against its territory prohibitively expensive and thereby compelling the opponent to reevaluate its calculations. This dynamic marked a shift toward active deterrence, a doctrine that emphasizes not only the threat but also the deliberate and controlled application of force.<sup>(40)</sup>

### **Ending Israel's Monopoly of Taking the Initiative to Strike**

The Iranian response signaled the end of Israel's longstanding monopoly on military initiative. It symbolically dismantled the one-sided deterrence equation by demonstrating that a state under attack possesses both the capability and the right to retaliate. What was once an exclusively Israeli prerogative — the ability to initiate offensive action — has now extended to its regional adversary. Through its attacks, Iran confirmed the emergence of a new regional deterrence equation, one that has unsettled the psychological and political foundations of Israeli society, long sustained by the illusion of absolute security.<sup>(41)</sup>

### **The Role of Technology and Smart Weapons**

Technology has assumed a pivotal role in redefining the very notion of military power, increasingly centered on what military studies describe as low-cost smart weapons. These include drones and precision-guided missiles, which constitute a new form of deterrence. In this conflict, Iranian Shahed and Mohajer drones, though far less destructive than fighter aircraft, succeeded in breaching Israeli airspace and striking targets deep within Tel Aviv. This illustrates how military technology has become a decisive instrument in managing contemporary warfare. Through drones and smart missiles, Iran has gained the means to project threat and deterrence without bearing prohibitive material expenses or human casualties.<sup>(42)</sup>

### **Implications for Regional Security**

The transformations in the rules of deterrence between Iran and Israel have significantly broadened the scope for further repercussions on the security architecture of the Middle East, as follows:

### **Initiating a Regional Race for Deterrence**

The Israeli attack on Iranian nuclear facilities, which operate under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), constituted a grave turning point in the nuclear non-proliferation regime. The unprecedented nature of such an act — carried out by a state that is not party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) — undermined the treaty's legitimacy and potentially compels regional actors to weigh the prospect of developing their own deterrence capabilities,<sup>(43)</sup> particularly in light of the actions of the United States, Israel and Iran. This dynamic deepens the prevailing crisis of trust and heightens the risk of a regional “balance of terror.”<sup>(44)</sup>

Historical precedent indicates that states subjected to preemptive attacks on their nuclear programs often accelerate efforts to develop alternative programs in secrecy, circumventing international oversight. Accordingly, an Israeli strike on Iranian nuclear facilities would likely convince Iran of the futility of relying on international assurances, reinforcing the perception that the possession of nuclear weapons alone can effectively deter future attacks. This may prompt Iran to expedite its approach to crossing the nuclear threshold, with consequences that could reverberate far beyond the Iranian-Israeli confrontation and threaten established regional security arrangements.<sup>(45)</sup>

### **Threatening the Security of the Gulf**

The Iran-Israel war has exposed the Gulf region to unprecedented security threats. Positioned at the epicenter of regional instability, the Gulf states have responded with cautious pragmatism, adopting a strategy of strategic hedging in their dealings with the belligerents, while consistently affirming their refusal to get involved in the conflict.<sup>(46)</sup>

Conversely, the US attack on Iranian nuclear facilities intensified the risks facing Gulf security rather than reducing them. The Gulf states denounced the United States' Operation Midnight Hammer to destroy Iranian nuclear sites, characterizing it as a breach of the UN Charter and an affront to the principle of territorial sovereignty. Furthermore, they cautioned against the dangerous precedent such operations could set for the future of Gulf security.<sup>(47)</sup>

The collapse of the Iranian political system could unleash widespread instability, significantly endangering the security of the strategically crucial, oil-rich Gulf region. The emergence of a failed state on the Gulf's borders would represent a worst-case scenario, further exacerbated by the possibility that any succeeding government might pursue an even more extreme and radical agenda, both internally and across the region.<sup>(48)</sup>

While Iran maintains cordial ties with Qatar and targeted the Al Udeid Air Base not due to animosity against Qatar but because of the US military presence there, the strikes nonetheless compromised Doha's security. The incident underscored Tehran's readiness to subordinate neighborly relations to its national security imperatives, highlighting its persistent capacity to threaten its neighbors.

This dynamic reveals that Gulf security remains intrinsically fragile whenever it runs counter to Iran's strategic objectives.<sup>(49)</sup>

Israel is also increasingly viewed as a destabilizing force in the region,<sup>(50)</sup> particularly after its attack on Doha targeting Hamas leaders. Consequently, calls have grown within Gulf circles to reconsider relations with Israel, and even to re-evaluate the US security umbrella.<sup>(51)</sup> Thus, Gulf security faces serious challenges in light of the changing patterns, levels and strategies of confrontation following the Israeli-Iranian conflict.<sup>(52)</sup>

### **Violating National Sovereignty**

The Israeli-Iranian war led to violations of the national sovereignty of neighboring countries. Some, like Iran and Qatar, were subjected to direct aggression. Others, including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan, experienced violations of their airspace. These violations can be explained as follows:

#### ***States Coming Under Attack***

Article 2, paragraph 4 of the United Nations Charter requires all member states to refrain in their international relations from threatening or using force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state. Such actions must not contradict UN principles.<sup>(53)</sup> Given this context, two states were subjected to aggression:

■ **Iran:** The targeting of Iran by the United States and Israel, conducted outside the framework of the Security Council and without justification, constituted a blatant violation of UN General Assembly Resolution 3314. This resolution, adopted on December 14, 1974, defines aggression in international law. The aforesaid US and Israel actions also fall within the broader scope of the crime of aggression. Furthermore, the attacks on nuclear facilities in a sovereign state violated the prohibition on the use of force. They posed a direct threat to Iran's territorial integrity and infringed upon its sovereign right to control and defend its territory.<sup>(54)</sup>

■ **Qatar:** Doha was subjected to two attacks despite not being a party to the conflict. The first occurred on June 23, 2015, when Iran launched an attack on the Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. This was in retaliation for the US military operation against its nuclear facilities. While largely symbolic, intended to preserve the Iranian establishment's domestic standing and to signal to the United States that it could threaten US interests in the region,<sup>(55)</sup> the main consequence was the violation of Qatari sovereignty.<sup>(56)</sup>

The second attack took place on September 9, 2015, when Israel struck Doha, targeting members of the Hamas Political Bureau. This delegation had gathered to discuss the US president's ceasefire proposal for Gaza with Israeli counterparts. Israel's strike thus targeted the territory of the mediating state, which had hosted these negotiations for nearly two years. The attack caused multiple deaths

and injuries among civilians, sparked widespread condemnation and represented a serious threat to Qatar's national sovereignty.<sup>(57)</sup>

### ***Airspace Violation***

Israel and Iran violated the airspace of neighboring countries — including Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan — without consent. These states lacked the defensive capabilities needed to safeguard their national sovereignty against such breaches. Israel extensively used their airspace to intercept Iranian missiles and aircraft, as well as to refuel its own planes mid-flight. Meanwhile, Iran deployed missiles and drones through these airspaces en route to Israel, representing a clear infringement of the principle of full sovereignty over airspace. This also contravenes the principle of neutrality as outlined in the Hague Conventions, which stipulate that a neutral state's territory, including its airspace, must be legally protected from becoming a battlefield.<sup>(58)</sup>

### ***Threatening Waterways and Global Energy Security***

One potential escalation scenario, should the war with Iran continue, is the closure of the Strait of Hormuz to global oil trade. Additionally, the Houthis continue to threaten navigation in the Bab al-Mandab Strait. This scenario and Houthi belligerency seriously risks global energy security. Approximately 35% of the world's seaborne crude oil exports and 20% of its liquefied natural gas exports pass through the Strait of Hormuz. Oil and gas exporters in the Gulf states and Iran rely heavily on this route. Tehran would likely be compelled to close the strait if its leadership faces an existential threat or if damage to its critical production or export infrastructure renders it unable to export oil.<sup>(59)</sup>

Regarding the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Houthis have successfully threatened navigation there. Major powers have been unable to deter these threats effectively. As a result, many shipping companies rerouted their vessels around the Cape of Good Hope. This detour adds approximately 2,500 nautical miles and 10 extra days to the journey. Consequently, revenues from the Suez Canal have declined by 40%.<sup>(60)</sup>

### ***Reshaping Alliances***

The Israeli-Iranian conflict has led to a reassessment of regional alliances. Some states are exploring new security arrangements, while others focus on strengthening collective defense partnerships based on a shared perception of threat. Additionally, the emergence of new tools — such as nuclear threats, cyberattacks and drones — is pushing security doctrines beyond traditional frameworks. This shift favors preventative and proactive approaches grounded in a broader, more comprehensive understanding of evolving risks.<sup>(61)</sup> The map of alliances in the Middle East is being redrawn. Countries are combining strategies of hedging, alignment and mediation to avoid direct involvement in conflicts. Their goal is to maximize security gains while minimizing risks and exposure.<sup>(62)</sup> The Atlantic Council report by Jonathan Panikoff succinctly captures the evolving

regional dynamics by stating that the confrontation has succeeded in imposing new realities. However, it has also created a strategic vacuum. This vacuum necessitates a comprehensive redefinition of alliances and the rules governing interactions in the Middle East.<sup>(63)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The conflict between Israel and Iran did not conclude with the ceasefire, as its root causes persist. The primary reason the fighting stopped was the deterrence achieved by both sides, following heavy losses. Iranian missiles that bypassed the Iron Dome caused unprecedented destruction in Israeli cities. This paralyzed daily life in Israel and heavily impacted the economy, tourism and education sectors. In contrast, Israeli attacks damaged key strategic sites in Iran, including important facilities and the elimination of leaders and scientists. However, Israel failed to meet its objectives: it did not topple the establishment nor dismantle its nuclear program. Furthermore, continuing the war would have imposed an enormous economic burden that Israel was unwilling to bear. Iran, meanwhile, recognized that prolonging the conflict would likely cost the Iranian ruling system its survival, as it could not endure a full-scale war against the United States.

The 12-Day War prompted shifts in the deterrence strategies of both Israel and Iran. These shifts included a move toward direct and open confrontation and an enhanced ability to penetrate deep into enemy territory. This broke Israel's long-standing monopoly on initiative and deterrence. Both sides also increasingly employed precision weapons to achieve objectives without engaging in direct conflict. Additionally, Israel received unprecedented support from the United States. These shifts have led to significant consequences for regional security. They have fueled a regional arms race, heightened threats to Gulf security and resulted in violations of national sovereignty. The security of strategic waterways and global energy supplies has been jeopardized, while discussions about the future restructuring of alliances have intensified.



## Endnotes

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# THE US-IRAN APPROACH TOWARD NUCLEAR TALKS AFTER OCTOBER 7

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## Abstract

This research paper elucidates the interactions and strategic motivations that prompted both the United States and Iran to engage in nuclear negotiations mediated by Oman following the return of US President Donald Trump to the White House in early 2025. The study argues that developments following October 7, including the decline of Iranian geopolitical influence in the Middle East and the weakening of its network of allies (the “Axis of Resistance”) due to military confrontations with Israel, were influential factors in the negotiations. It further contends that there is a reciprocal relationship between this decline in geopolitical influence and the outbreak of the 12-Day War between Israel and Iran, which impacted the course of the Oman-mediated negotiations and the future of US-Iran talks. In other words, there is an assumption that the weakening of the “Axis of Resistance” influenced negotiations before the 12-Day War, just as it contributed to the war’s outbreak, which has redefined and will continue to influence the nuclear talks between Iran and the United States. The study concludes that future negotiations under the Trump administration are anticipated but will be contingent on US conditions; otherwise, Iran faces the prospect of a new military confrontation amid diminished leverage in terms of its regional and nuclear bargaining chips.

**Keywords:** Nuclear negotiations, “Axis of Resistance,” 12-Day-War, Middle East, Iran, US.

## Introduction

During his first term, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran. However, in 2025, he returned to the negotiating table amid a region engulfed in chaos and uncertainty, largely due to Israel's violations of international law and its opening of multiple military fronts against what is known as the "Axis of Resistance"— Iran's regional proxies that serve as a strategic buffer against confrontation with the West. This culminated in a short but consequential 12-Day War.

Negotiation theory typically assumes that parties begin with high demands and gradually make reciprocal concessions to reach common ground. However, in the indirect negotiations between the United States and Iran, the US side reversed this pattern. It began with proposals that some observers described as nearly identical to the 2015 agreement, only to escalate their demands later, threatening to derail the talks and prompting Iranian warnings of withdrawal.

What distinguishes the current US-Iranian negotiations from those preceding the 2015 accord is their expanded scope. They are no longer confined to the nuclear file alone but now encompass Iran's regional role — particularly its support for the "Axis of Resistance"— as well as its ballistic missile program, which has proven to be a significant threat to Israel and neighboring states. This was especially evident during Iran's missile strikes on occupied territories in 2024 and throughout the war with Israel, in retaliation for attacks on its own soil.

For scholars of international affairs, particularly those focused on the Middle East, it is clear that Iran's regional influence has diminished since October 7, and its nuclear program has lost much of its coercive power following the recent conflict. Consequently, Tehran must reassess its strategic posture toward both Israel and the United States if it seeks to avoid another war — one that both sides consider plausible, and which could result not only in the total dismantling of its nuclear infrastructure but in the collapse of its regime and its status as a regional power. This raises a critical question: will Iran's nuclear program be subject to renewed negotiations, or will war dictate the outcome, given the trajectory of indirect talks and the legacy of the 2015 agreement?

To address this question, the study explores the likelihood of new negotiations, albeit under intensified international and US sanctions, and the potential for a short war — used as leverage by Washington and Tel Aviv — especially amid Iran's declining regional clout. The study adopts both descriptive and comparative methodologies. Understanding US-Iranian negotiations requires not only an analysis of surrounding events and their progression but also a comparative lens with the 2015 talks. This dual approach sheds light on Iran's bargaining tools — its nuclear and missile programs and its regional proxies — as instruments of leverage in its dealings with the West.

## The Nuclear Negotiations Landscape: A Comparison Between 2015 and 2025

In 2018, during Trump's first presidential term, the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear agreement signed

with Iran in 2015. However, by 2025, Trump returned to the negotiating table, this time seeking a direct and expedited deal — one he described as a “good agreement.” Iran, facing mounting pressure, adopted a cautious approach to defuse the escalating threat, yet refused to engage in what it deemed a humiliating negotiation. Ultimately, war broke out and the talks collapsed.<sup>(1)</sup>

The regional and international environments surrounding the nuclear negotiations in 2015 and those in 2025 differ significantly. These shifts can be outlined as follows:

### **Nature of the Negotiations and the Involved Parties**

The original JCPOA negotiations were conducted between Iran and the P5+1 group (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council — the United States, Russia, China, France and the UK — plus Germany), reflecting a multilateral diplomatic effort. In contrast, the 2025 negotiations were indirect and involved only the United States, with Oman serving as a mediator. This shift not only signals a diminished European and Russian role in the process but also underscores Washington’s unilateral approach and its sidelining of former partners.

Following its 2018 withdrawal, the United States labeled the JCPOA a strategic mistake committed by the Obama administration. Iran capitalized on this exit, abandoning its commitments and accelerating its nuclear program. It deployed more advanced centrifuges and increased uranium enrichment to 60%, edging closer to the 90% threshold required for weaponization. Although Biden’s administration initiated indirect talks in 2021 to revive the JCPOA, Iran continued its enrichment activities, and the negotiations ultimately failed.

In the 2025 round, Iran entered talks with a potent bargaining chip: its stockpile of 60%-enriched uranium, which, according to the latest report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), had reached 400 kilograms. It also possessed a significantly larger number of advanced centrifuges compared to its capabilities in 2015. However, Iran had lost a key leverage point it once held — namely, the regional military strength of its allied militias.

Relations between the United States and Iran remained defined by deep mutual distrust, exacerbated by the collapse of the previous agreement. While mistrust has been a constant since the 1979 Iranian revolution, the 2025 negotiations were marked by each side demanding binding guarantees. Washington insisted on assurances that Iran would not pursue nuclear weapons in the future, while Tehran demanded guarantees that the United States would not withdraw from any new agreement.

### **Israeli Pressure and Its Impact**

The United States has consistently leveraged Israeli threats to strike Iran’s nuclear facilities as a bargaining tool to pressure Tehran into concessions and finalize a deal — both during the 2015 negotiations and in the more recent rounds. What

changed, however, is that the threat turned into military action. War became a mechanism to compel Iran to abandon its nuclear program without the need for prolonged negotiations.

Israel has long opposed any negotiated solution to the Iranian nuclear program, not because of doubts about its peaceful nature, but because it fundamentally rejects Iran's retention of a nuclear program in any form. This stance was made clear when Israel launched military action against Iran in the midst of its negotiations with Washington — aiming to prevent Tehran from securing a second agreement that would allow it to preserve its nuclear infrastructure, as it did under the original JCPOA. In fact, Israel's rejection of the 2015 agreement is widely seen as the underlying reason for Trump's decision to withdraw from the deal.<sup>(2)</sup>

### **The Role of Iran's Regional Proxies**

To defuse mounting US and Israeli threats, Iran adopted an advanced defensive strategy centered on externalizing its confrontation with the West and avoiding direct engagement. This approach involved supporting resistance groups in Palestine and Lebanon, financing and organizing armed factions in Yemen and Iraq and backing the Assad regime in Syria.

With planning and support from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iran-aligned militias and armed factions in Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, Iraq and Syria played a pivotal role in expanding Iranian influence across the Middle East. This field-based expansion reflects one of Iran's core methods for managing regional conflicts —empowering proxy forces without directly entering military confrontations.

Strategically, this model aligns with regional security complex theory (RSCT), which posits that geographically linked states share interconnected security threats. Under this framework, escalation in one area can trigger tensions across the entire region.<sup>(3)</sup>

However, this dynamic shifted dramatically after Operation Al-Aqsa Flood on October 7, 2023. Israel declared war on Hamas, launched a military campaign against Hezbollah in Lebanon, intensified strikes on the Houthis in Yemen and capitalized on the collapse of the Assad regime — an Iranian ally in Syria — to expand its presence in southern Syria. Simultaneously, it initiated military operations in the West Bank. Although the United States carried out airstrikes against Shiite militias in Iraq, Israel did not claim responsibility for these actions. Nevertheless, Iraq was listed among the seven active fronts identified by the Israeli military, signaling a broad regional confrontation.

These developments significantly weakened the “Axis of Resistance”— Iran's network of regional proxies — compared to its position prior to the 2015 nuclear negotiations.

Iran's reliance on loyal armed groups in neighboring countries has long been central to its strategy for projecting regional power and applying indirect pressure on adversaries. These proxies also served as bargaining chips in major nego-

tiations over Iran's nuclear program and ballistic missile capabilities. However, the 2023 regional war severely undermined Iran's ability to leverage these assets in the latest round of talks.

The fall of the Assad regime in late 2024 marked a significant and humiliating setback for Iran, unraveling over a decade of investment and influence in Syria, estimated at between \$30 billion and \$50 billion. This collapse disrupted Iran's regional smuggling networks, weakened the so-called Shiite Crescent and forced Tehran to reassess its strategic footprint.<sup>(4)</sup> The emergence of a new political order in Syria represents a turning point in the erosion of Iranian influence in both Syria and Lebanon.<sup>(5)</sup>

### **The Role of Regional and International Powers in the Negotiations**

Tehran has actively sought to strengthen its economic and military ties with China and Russia, entering into strategic partnerships with its most powerful allies to enhance its leverage in negotiations — far beyond what it possessed during the 2015 nuclear agreement. China, as Iran's primary oil customer, has supported the resumption of US-Iranian negotiations, recognizing that stability in the Gulf is vital for the stability of global oil markets and the Chinese economy. Beijing also played a pivotal role in facilitating the 2023 rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, restoring diplomatic relations between the two states.

On March 27, 2021, China and Iran signed a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement aimed at deepening military cooperation across various domains, including joint research, intelligence sharing, military training, weapons manufacturing and strategic development.<sup>(6)</sup>

On January 17, 2025, Presidents Vladimir Putin and Masoud Pezeshkian signed a treaty to expand economic and military cooperation between Russia and Iran. Framed as a comprehensive strategic partnership, the agreement commits both nations to joint military exercises, technical defense collaboration and close coordination on global and regional security issues. It also includes provisions for mutual defense against external threats, stipulating that neither party shall assist any aggressor targeting the other.

Moscow and Tehran further pledged not to allow their territories to be used for supporting separatist movements or any actions that threaten the territorial integrity of the other. Intelligence and security agencies in both countries are now obligated to exchange information and coordinate responses to shared threats.<sup>(7)</sup>

Regionally, Iran has pursued reconciliation with Saudi Arabia, restoring diplomatic ties through Chinese mediation in 2023 during President Joe Biden's tenure. Tehran recognizes Riyadh as a key regional actor with close ties to the current US administration, particularly under President Trump. Saudi Arabia played a notable role in Trump's decision to lift sanctions on Syria and its new President Ahmad al-Sharaa. Iran may seek similar support from Riyadh to ease sanctions and improve relations with the West — provided it recalibrates its regional posture toward cooperation.



## **Strategic Objectives of Iran and the United States**

Negotiations are a peaceful mechanism for resolving or preventing conflict, and each party enters the process with distinct goals. The central question is: what motivated Trump to re-engage with Iran after withdrawing from the 2015 agreement, and what prompted Iran to return to the table after demanding that the Biden administration lift all sanctions and provide guarantees against future US withdrawals — conditions that led to the failure of the 2021 talks?

### **Iran's Stated and Unstated Objectives**

Iran has publicly declared that its primary goal in reentering negotiations is to secure sanctions relief and obtain guarantees that the United States will not withdraw from any future agreement. Tehran insists on retaining its peaceful nuclear and missile programs, though it has expressed willingness to offer technical concessions.

Sanctions relief would enable access to foreign currency, facilitate financial exchange and improve trade, thereby boosting purchasing power, fostering economic growth and reducing inflation — which has reached unprecedented levels. Conversely, failed or stalled negotiations would prolong economic sanctions, potentially intensifying them on critical sectors such as oil, energy and banking. This would deepen Iran's economic crisis, increase unemployment and erode purchasing power further, potentially fueling domestic unrest among marginalized populations. Limited partnerships with Russia and China cannot on their own resolve Iran's economic challenges, despite the signing of strategic agreements with both nations.<sup>(8)</sup>

The real objective behind Iran's engagement in negotiations is to avoid a war with Israel and the United States — especially in light of the declining strength of its military and proxies in Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Entering into an open conflict would not grant Iran any strategic advantage, particularly with the United States acting as a direct supporter of Israel. What Iran needs most is time.

Iran has learned how to withstand Western economic sanctions, much like North Korea and Russia. It also benefits from its presence in the BRICS bloc and its growing economic ties with Russia, China and other Asian countries through its membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Yet these alignments have not shielded Iran from threats; it has already faced military attacks and must now focus on how to avoid future wars.

It is worth noting that the signing of the 2015 nuclear agreement followed a lengthy negotiation process that began in 2003 between Iran and the European Union, due to Washington's initial refusal to negotiate directly with Tehran. Russia and China later joined the process, turning the talks into a multilateral effort that began in 2006 and culminated in the nuclear deal.<sup>(9)</sup> Iran may have entered the latest round of negotiations with the United States, hoping to replicate the 2015 scenario — buying itself as much time as possible to reorganize its strategic assets and rehabilitate its regional proxies.

From the outset, Iran was unwilling to compromise on uranium enrichment or its nuclear program. It aimed to prolong talks to avoid war, especially amid limited support from its leadership, which remains skeptical of negotiations. The dominant “fundamentalists” in the Iranian Parliament oppose any concessions on enrichment, viewing the program as a costly yet indispensable national asset. They insist that any future agreement must not be weaker than the 2015 accord and rejects the shutdown of nuclear facilities similar to those suspended under the previous deal.<sup>(10)</sup>

According to Mohsen Milani,<sup>(11)</sup> Iran perceives its confrontation with Israel as an extension of its broader struggle with the United States. Iran views Israel not only as a hostile entity in its own right but also as a forward-operating proxy of Washington in the region.<sup>(12)</sup> Thus, Tehran believed that entering negotiations with the United States might restrain Israel — whose actions had become increasingly erratic post-October 7 — and potentially prevent further military escalation. However, this calculation proved overly optimistic, as war ultimately broke out.

Iran’s regional influence has historically expanded amid state fragility and instability in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Given that these conditions persist, Tehran may yet regain its foothold in the region once the war subsides. Negotiations offer a window to buy time and avoid direct confrontation with Israel until such a recovery is possible.

Hezbollah, Iran’s most formidable proxy in the Levant, retains a significant missile arsenal and the capacity to open a full front should the ceasefire collapse<sup>(13)</sup> — especially following the February 2025 truce in southern Lebanon.

Yemen also remains a strategic asset in Iran’s deterrence architecture. Despite the impact of the Gaza peace deal on the Houthis’ narrative and the exposure of their alignment with Iranian policy, their fate is now more closely tied to Tehran. Iran will likely seek to preserve their operational capacity for future conflicts and negotiations.

### **The United States’ Declared and Undeclared Objectives**

Initially, Washington’s stated goal was to reduce Iran’s uranium enrichment levels and ensure the peaceful nature of its nuclear program. However, the US position evolved to demand Iran’s complete abandonment of its nuclear program and the transfer of enriched uranium abroad. This shift stems from deep mistrust of Iran’s intentions and mounting pressure from Israel. The issue is not enrichment per se, but the level: 3%–5% suffices for energy production, while weapons-grade uranium requires 90% enrichment.

Trump sought a diplomatic victory without triggering a military conflict that could spike oil prices and harm the US economy. He needed a deal that demonstrated clear Iranian concessions to satisfy Republicans, the pro-Israel lobby and neoconservatives — many of whom opposed the 2015 agreement<sup>(14)</sup> for focusing



solely on nuclear non-proliferation while neglecting Iran's ballistic missile program and destabilizing regional activities.

Trump aimed to secure a historic win by brokering a deal that neutralized Iran's threat to Israel, ended the regional nuclear race and positioned him as a peacemaker. Such an achievement could bolster his legacy and potentially earn him the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet, in the end, he permitted Israel to launch a war against Iran and allowed the United States to enter the conflict — even as indirect negotiations were underway.

During the course of negotiations, Iranian officials accused the United States of inconsistency in its positions — at times adopting contradictory stances, saying one thing outside the talks and presenting something entirely different within them.<sup>(15)</sup> Even the views expressed by US officials appeared to be in stark disagreement with one another. This suggests that one of Washington's underlying goals may have been to swiftly conclude a new agreement on its own terms, with little regard for Iran's position. From the outset, Trump made it clear that Iran faced two options: prosperity or destruction. In other words, if Iran agreed to a deal under his conditions, it would benefit; otherwise, war — and inevitable ruin — would follow.

Trump's two-month ultimatum to Iran to reach a new agreement, coupled with threats of military action, indicates that the United States entered the negotiations with a fixed timeline. Unlike previous rounds, Washington had no intention of allowing Iran to prolong talks and buy time. Instead, it was prepared to resort to force to compel compliance or dismantle Iran's nuclear infrastructure entirely.

### **Muscat Rounds: Revealing the Fault Lines of the Dispute**

At the outset of the negotiations, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio publicly affirmed Washington's acceptance of Iran's right to a peaceful nuclear program. However, this position was later reversed, with the United States demanding the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear capabilities and the inclusion of its ballistic missile program in the talks — an unmistakable escalation in demands. This raised questions about the possibility of mutual concessions and the viability of reaching an agreement acceptable both domestically and internationally. These dynamics came into sharp focus during the third round of negotiations, widely regarded as the most pivotal, as it introduced technical dimensions for the first time and clarified each party's strategic objectives.

The US delegation presented several key demands:

■ Iran must halt uranium enrichment and import all necessary nuclear materials from abroad, with Russia designated as the supplier. This contrasts with the 2015 agreement, which granted Iran the right to enrich uranium and retain its centrifuges.<sup>(16)</sup>

■ US inspectors must be allowed to examine suspect Iranian facilities. Iran agreed to permit their participation within IAEA inspection teams, but strictly limited access to nuclear sites.

■ The United States must verify that Iran is not manufacturing long-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads by inspecting specific military installations — a demand Iran categorically rejected.

■ Iran must either ship enriched uranium exceeding 3.67% to Russia or convert it into fuel plates unsuitable for weaponization. Iran responded that, given the absence of binding guarantees from the United States, it would retain the uranium under IAEA supervision, with written permission to export and utilize it should the United States violate or withdraw from the agreement.

■ US companies should be allowed to invest in Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Iran welcomed this, offering US firms access to several projects. The Iranian foreign minister confirmed that Iran plans to build 19 new nuclear power plants, and the United States is invited to participate.

■ The agreement must not be time-bound, unlike the previous nuclear deal.

Iran's counter-demands included:

■ Full and immediate lifting of US sanctions upon signing a new agreement, starting with those imposed after Washington's withdrawal from the JCPOA, and guarantees against their reimposition under different pretexts.

■ Binding enforcement mechanisms to ensure US compliance, including penalties for violations and provisions allowing Iran to suspend its obligations if the United States fails to uphold its commitments.

■ Credible guarantees that the United States will not exit any future agreement, regardless of changes in administration.

■ Compensation for damages incurred due to the US withdrawal from the 2015 deal, release of frozen Iranian assets abroad and reopening of banking channels.

■ US responsibility for halting European threats to trigger the JCPOA's snap-back clause, which would reinstate international sanctions.

■ Cessation of all hostile US actions — military, economic, political and media — either during negotiations or following any agreement.<sup>(17)</sup>

Iran considers uranium enrichment a sovereign right, protected under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and non-negotiable. The United States, however, views it as a strategic threat requiring complete cessation — not merely reduction. This position evolved into a demand for “zero enrichment” on Iranian soil.

Washington further escalated its demands, calling not only for zero enrichment but for the complete dismantling of Iran's nuclear infrastructure — a red line Tehran refuses to cross. Iran maintains that its nuclear program is strictly peaceful. Chair of the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Ebrahim Azizi reaffirmed that the Strategic Action Plan to Lift Sanctions and Protect Ira-

nian Nation's Interests passed in December 2020 obligates the government to uphold Iran's nuclear rights, including enrichment.<sup>(18)</sup>

### **The Impact of the 12-Day War on Negotiations**

In his book *Iran's Rise and Rivalry with the US in the Middle East*, Mohsen Milani argues that Israel functions as the forward arm of US policy in the region — applying military and intelligence pressure on Iran, while Washington handles sanctions and political containment. Every Israeli strike inside Iran or against its allies is interpreted in Tehran as part of its broader confrontation with the United States.<sup>(19)</sup> Thus, any Israeli action is perceived as having prior US approval, including decisions to go to war.

The war began on June 13, 2025, and lasted for 12 days — hence its name, the 12-Day War. It marked a shift from Iran's reliance on shadow wars and proxy conflicts in its struggle against rivals in the Middle East and the United States, toward direct confrontation with Israel and the United States.

Many observers had ruled out the possibility of Israel or the United States launching a war against Iran during the negotiation period, citing a range of strategic calculations. Some of these considerations may have previously prevented war altogether, while others were directly tied to the ongoing negotiations between Tehran and Washington.

Among the key reasons was that the United States likely had no interest in toppling the Iranian ruling system, as such an outcome would not serve its interests or contribute to regional stability. Washington also feared that war could severely impact the global economy — especially energy markets — given Iran's control over the Strait of Hormuz, one of the world's most critical maritime trade routes. In the Strait of Hormuz alone, nearly 20 million barrels of oil pass through daily, accounting for around 30% of global oil trade.<sup>(20)</sup>

Additionally, US calculations factored in the threat posed by Iran's regional proxies. Despite their current weakened state, these groups still possess military capabilities and represent a threat to Israel — whether it is the Houthis, Hezbollah or the resilient Hamas in Gaza. Of particular concern was the possibility of the Houthis moving to control the Bab al-Mandab Strait. Even while engaged in military confrontations with Israel, they retain the capacity to disrupt international shipping and damage the global economy.

The war's impact on the negotiations can be summarized as follows:

### **Israel's Preemptive Strike to Block a US-Iran Agreement**

Many experts believed Israel would refrain from attacking Iran's nuclear facilities or conducting assassinations, based on Trump's stated preference for diplomacy and his desire to achieve a breakthrough after failing to resolve the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

In reality, Israel opposed any US deal with Iran. For Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Iranian threat — embodied in its nuclear and missile programs —

is a key political asset. A US-Iran agreement would undermine his narrative and weaken his grip on power.

Israel has historically employed preemptive strikes to neutralize emerging nuclear threats, as seen in its attacks on Iraq's Osirak reactor in 1981 and Syria's suspected facility in 2007.<sup>(21)</sup> It has also pursued a campaign of assassinations targeting Iranian nuclear scientists and military commanders, both inside and outside Iran. When intelligence suggested Iran was nearing nuclear weapons capability, Israel launched strikes to delay its progress by several years.

Israel is unlikely to tolerate prolonged negotiations that could allow Iran to regain regional influence. The continued existence of the IRGC and its Quds Force means the "Axis of Resistance" — despite its current fragility — could be revived post-conflict. The Quds Force serves as the IRGC's external arm, coordinating with and supporting Iran's regional proxies through training, arms and intelligence.

### **US Strikes on Iran's Nuclear Facilities**

Trump gave Iran a 60-day window to reach a nuclear agreement. However, Iran's persistent stalling and rigid conditions during the negotiations eroded Washington's confidence in Tehran's seriousness, ultimately prompting the United States to greenlight Israeli military strikes against Iranian targets.<sup>(22)</sup>

From Tehran's perspective, the US entry into the war alongside Israel was seen as a betrayal of the negotiation process. Iranian officials accused Washington of using diplomacy as a smokescreen to enable Israel's surprise attacks at a moment of strategic vulnerability — just as Iran was preparing for both open war with Israel and a sixth round of talks with the Trump administration. The timing of the strikes, before any formal collapse of negotiations, reinforced Iranian distrust in the United States as a credible negotiating partner.

On June 22, 2025, the United States bombed Iran's nuclear facilities in Fordow, Natanz and Isfahan using bunker-busting munitions — technology possessed exclusively by the United States. This raised a critical question: why did Washington enter a war while negotiations were still underway?

Several strategic considerations help explain this decision:

- To conclude the war swiftly, as prolonged conflict would be costly for Israel, which was already engaged on multiple fronts: Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.

- Israel lacked the military capabilities and specialized weaponry to penetrate deeply fortified Iranian nuclear sites like Fordow and Natanz.

- The absence of escalation by Iran's regional proxies signaled a constrained operational environment and a temporary tactical retreat. This weakened Iran's ability to leverage asymmetric warfare as a pressure tool.<sup>(23)</sup> Notably, militias such as Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) did not target US assets, nor did they launch retaliatory strikes against Israel, unlike their initial support for Gaza at the war's outset.

This raises the question: who leveraged whom? Did the United States use Israel to pressure Iran into concessions, or did Israel use the United States to distract Tehran with negotiations while executing surprise strikes? Trump had openly stated during the talks that Israeli military action against Iran was highly probable. Most observers agree that Israel would not have acted without US approval.

It appears both Washington and Tel Aviv benefited from each other's moves, suggesting coordinated planning. Israel has long sought war with Iran but cannot proceed without US military backing. Meanwhile, the United States repeatedly warned Iran that war was a viable option should negotiations fail. The two-month deadline and the element of surprise served as a tactical demonstration that military force remains on the table to compel Iranian concessions in future talks.

### **Negotiations Between War and Diplomacy**

The US Defense Intelligence Agency reported that Iran's centrifuges might still be intact beneath the rubble of the three targeted sites. The IAEA also announced that it could not account for 410 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60% — enough to produce 10 nuclear warheads — suggesting the Iranian nuclear threat remains.<sup>(24)</sup>

Thus, despite Trump's declaration that the joint Israeli-US strikes had eliminated Iran's nuclear program, the reality is that they merely delayed its progress. The nuclear file remains unresolved and contentious, requiring a strategic decision: return to negotiations or repeat the path of war.

### **The Diplomatic Option**

Israel — and behind it, the United States — now faces a stark binary in light of the enduring Iranian nuclear threat: war or a return to negotiations. The latter may prove the more pragmatic path, as another round of open conflict would exact steep costs on all parties involved, especially in the absence of any guarantee of decisive military victory.<sup>(25)</sup>

The war inflicted heavy losses on all sides. Iran's nuclear infrastructure was severely damaged, its scientists and military commanders killed and its missile capabilities degraded. Israel endured Iranian missile strikes deep into its territory, disrupting daily life and exposing vulnerabilities in its deterrence posture. The United States, meanwhile, depleted a quarter of its THAAD missile stockpile defending Israel, according to a CNN report published on May 28, 2025.<sup>(26)</sup>

Iran, for its part, does not seek an existential war. During the 12-Day War, it repeatedly signaled a preference for de-escalation, even issuing advance notice of its retaliatory strike on the US Al-Udeid base in Qatar — a gesture acknowledged by Trump.<sup>(27)</sup> This suggests Tehran's intent to avoid direct conflict with Washington.

Moreover, Iran cannot rely on Russia or China for military support in a future war. Despite signing strategic agreements with both powers, neither took concrete steps to defend Iran during the recent attacks. Russia limited its response

to verbal condemnation, forcing Iran into a defensive posture and weakening its deterrence capabilities.<sup>(28)</sup>

Beyond the issue of trust between Iran and Russia, Tehran has long harbored grievances over Moscow's past actions. Russia previously took part in imposing sanctions on Iran and stalled arms deals, prompting accusations from Iranian officials — including former Foreign Minister Javad Zarif — that it obstructed a genuine opportunity to revive the nuclear agreement.

Behrouz Esbati, a senior commander in the IRGC, went further, accusing Russia of contributing to the downfall of Bashar al-Assad and collaborating with Israel in assassinations targeting IRGC officers in Syria. He claimed that Russia deliberately disabled air defense systems in coordination with Israeli strikes. According to Esbati, much of Russia's conduct following Operation Al-Aqsa Flood served the interests of the Israeli occupation.<sup>(29)</sup>

Given this context, negotiations with the United States remain a viable option. Iran has long employed tactical flexibility<sup>(30)</sup> — what its political literature calls “heroic flexibility” — to navigate existential threats and buy time.

### **The Triad of Negotiations, Sanctions and War**

Iran prefers diplomacy over war to resolve its nuclear dispute with the West, particularly the United States. Negotiations offer time to recover and rebuild its regional influence, using its proxies as bargaining chips — as it did in previous talks.

However, the United States appears unwilling to allow Iran such latitude. It has urged European allies to pressure Tehran by reactivating the JCPOA's snap-back mechanism. France, Germany and the UK formally notified the UN Security Council of Iran's alleged violations, prompting a vote on September 26, 2025, to reinstate international sanctions. A Russian-Chinese proposal to delay enforcement and extend the 2015 agreement by six months was rejected.

Iran continues to avoid open war with the United States but seeks indirect means of deterrence. It is likely to rebuild its regional proxies in preparation for future conflict with Israel or even the United States. Tehran will also aim to deepen ties with China and Russia and improve relations with Gulf states — especially Saudi Arabia — to avoid facing multiple hostile fronts.

Despite setbacks, Iran has not abandoned its regional allies. In Iraq, the PMF, backed by allied parliamentary factions, proposed legislation to institutionalize their military and political presence — ensuring continued Iranian influence across the region.

The United States has opposed this law, viewing it as a direct extension of Iranian power. Washington suspects Iran of covertly integrating its proxies into official security structures for political leverage, as part of a broader effort to recalibrate its regional strategy.<sup>(31)</sup> Western powers continue to pressure Iran through sanctions, diplomacy, military strikes and war. Yet, negotiations remain the most effective tool. While war delayed Iran's nuclear progress, it did not eliminate the



threat. The current US-European strategy hinges on renewed talks, backed by intensified sanctions, to compel Iran to accept Western terms — this time from a position of diminished regional influence.

Iran now finds itself in a precarious position. President Pezeshkian confirmed that after the UN vote on the snapback mechanism, the United States demanded Iran surrender its enriched uranium stockpile within three months — a condition he deemed unacceptable. He attributed the failure to reach consensus on the snapback mechanism to Washington's unreasonable demands, raising the prospect of renewed war if Iran fails to comply — just as it did after the previous 60-day deadline.

Despite US and Israeli claims that their strikes destroyed Iran's nuclear program, intelligence reports and expert assessments suggest otherwise. The damage was severe, but temporary — delaying Iran's capabilities by months or perhaps years.<sup>(32)</sup>

Iran still possesses significant quantities of enriched uranium at 60%, 20% and 3%–5% levels, along with thousands of advanced centrifuges, some of which were relocated to the fortified underground known as Kuh-e Kolang Gaz La or Pickaxe Mountain. This gives Tehran the ability to resume enrichment and potentially produce weapons-grade uranium in the future — either independently or with support from Russia or China. In short, Iran's strategy of delay and time-buying may once again place war on the table.<sup>(33)</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The war waged jointly by the United States and Israel against Iran significantly weakened Tehran's negotiating leverage, subjecting it to mounting pressures and strategic constraints. Among these were the temporary sidelining of its regional proxies and the disruption of its nuclear program — previously a cornerstone of its deterrence posture. Yet, the military strikes also revealed the limitations of force as a definitive solution to dismantle Iran's nuclear and ballistic capabilities, especially given their high cost. This reality tilts the balance toward viewing diplomacy as the more viable path for reaching a renewed nuclear agreement.

However, Iran's persistent strategy of delay, opacity and time-buying in its nuclear posture may provoke Washington and Tel Aviv to resort once again to military strikes — this time as a coercive tool to accelerate agreement under terms favorable to the Trump administration. The 12-Day War stands as a testament to Trump's approach: negotiations with Iran are possible, but only on US terms and within a timeframe dictated by Washington — otherwise, war remains the alternative.



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# IRAN'S STRATEGIC OPTIONS IN SYRIA AFTER THE FALL OF ASSAD'S REGIME

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## Abstract

This study examines Iran's strategic options regarding Syria and the broader region following the fall of the Assad regime in November 2024. The new government has significantly undermined Iran's influence in Syria, stripping it of a critical regional asset and a key component of its security doctrine. Analyzing Iran's options at this juncture is crucial, given its efforts to reestablish its role and influence in the region after significant setbacks to its regional proxies and allies — amid unprecedented regional and international pressure to curb its behavior, which has undermined regional security. The study explores the dimensions of Iran's declining influence by addressing the contours of Iran's clout in Syria before Assad's fall, Iran's vulnerabilities in this arena, the current conditions posing challenges to Iran's efforts to restore its presence in Syria and the region and the strategic options available to Iran to mitigate the impact of this significant decline.

**Keywords:** Iran, Syria, Assad regime, Iranian influence in Syria, Syrian opposition.

## **Introduction**

On November 27, 2024, Syrian opposition forces launched Operation Deterrence of Aggression against the Syrian regime, culminating in the fall of the Assad regime on December 8 of that year. The dramatic collapse of this five-decade-long regime presented Iran with a substantial geopolitical setback, the loss of one of its most prominent regional allies.

Under the Assad regime, Syria was far more than Iran's conventional ally. The country served as a vital bridge connecting Tehran with its regional depth to the eastern Mediterranean, while facilitating logistical and military support to its allies. The formation of this alliance involved decades of sustained effort and coordination, starting from former President Hafez al-Assad and culminating under Bashar al-Assad, resulting in a strategic alliance that entrenched Iranian influence across all facets of Syria.

Iran's loss of its Syrian ally coincided with the shocking decimation of the Lebanese Hezbollah through unprecedented Israeli strikes, eliminating its leadership and vital bases. As a result, the group could no longer confront Israel militarily. Moreover, Iran's nuclear facilities at the sites of Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan were targeted by the United States. Thus, Iran is facing a double strategic vulnerability: externally, with the loss of its Syrian ally and the decline of its influence due to the weakening of one of its most prominent regional arms; and internally, with the targeting of its nuclear facilities that undermines the Iranian security precept of maintaining a balance of deterrence.

In light of this complex landscape, this study examines the implications of the Assad regime's fall on Iran's regional influence. It traces the trajectory of Iran-Syria relations since 2011, analyzes the underlying factors that contributed to the fragility of bilateral relations, and reviews Iran's strategic pathways amid its loss of allies and regional vulnerability. This study attempts to answer the following critical question: What are Iran's strategic options in light of the loss of its Syrian ally and its increasing regional vulnerability?

## **The Manifestations of Iranian Influence in Syria After the 2011 Revolution**

Following the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, Iran emerged as one of the most prominent regional actors shaping the trajectory of events. Its multifaceted intervention had been a long-term strategic influence project that transcended the temporary alliance with the regime to become an institutionalized, structural and operational presence on the ground. The features of Iranian influence in Syria after 2011 can be explained as follows:

### **Military Influence**

Through its direct military support to the former Assad regime, Iranian influence in Syria was unrivalled. Iran's military presence expanded to about 570 sites, including 55 military bases and 515 outposts.<sup>(1)</sup> It was augmented by combatants integrated within pro-Iran militia brigades, deployed into 42 military divisions

and about 128 battalions. Additionally, 70,000 personnel from Basij volunteer battalions were tasked with securing Syrian cities and villages.<sup>(2)</sup> The Lebanese Hezbollah was the second most significant military force in Syria after the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), followed by the Iraqi militias. In Syria, Iran replicated the infiltration strategy that it had previously undertaken in Iraq via the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), an approach it had also followed in other countries within its sphere of influence. This involved building military formations to ensure the sustainability of its influence even in the event of regime change. To this end, it sought to establish paramilitary groups composed of thousands of fighters known as the People's Army (al-Jaysh al Sha'bi) and the Syrian National Defense Forces.<sup>(3)</sup>

This military entrenchment in Iran could be attributed to the Syrian army's degradation, which lost much of its cohesion due to divisions and defections. In 2013, around 6,500 senior military personnel were estimated to have defected. The remaining forces were deployed to protect only the capital and its surroundings.<sup>(4)</sup>

In order to institutionalize and legalize the presence of its elements in Syria and to enable their integration within the structure of the Syrian army, Iran invested in the construction and development of the remnants of the army while infiltrating its formations.<sup>(5)</sup> For example, in 2018, Iran signed a military cooperation agreement with the regime, which stipulated the continued deployment of military advisers, efforts to enhance defense infrastructure and assistance in the reconstruction of the Ministry of Defense facilities. Another agreement was signed in 2020 to strengthen military and security cooperation and reinforce air defense systems. This contributed to significantly increasing Syria's security dependence on Iran, which evolved into an organic strategic bond with the regime.<sup>(6)</sup>

### **Political Influence**

Iran's support was not confined to the military domain but also extended to extensive political backing of the Syrian regime. This was evident when Iran opposed US military intervention in 2013, after the regime used chemical weapons in Eastern Ghouta. In coordination with Russia, Iran successfully persuaded the regime to surrender its chemical arsenal to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).<sup>(7)</sup> However, Iran declined to participate in the second round of the Geneva conference, which proposed a ceasefire and the formation of a transitional government, arguing that it opposed any preconditions for its participation.<sup>(8)</sup> In addition, there are indications that Iran included the Syrian conflict in its agenda during nuclear negotiations with the United States and European powers at that time. This suggests that an understanding of Syria was reached, ultimately contributing to the consensus for the nuclear agreement in 2015.

Iran also put forward several initiatives to reach a political solution for Syria, most notably the four-point plan proposed by former Iranian Foreign Minis-

ter Mohammad Javad Zarif. It outlined a ceasefire, the establishment of border control, the prevention of foreign fighter infiltration, the delivery of humanitarian aid and the formation of a transitional government. However, this initiative overlapped with the 2012 initiative of UN Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, which called for forming a national government, amending the constitution and holding elections.<sup>(9)</sup>

Iran likely engaged in resolving the Syrian crisis, yet avoided any proposal involving the president's relinquishment of power, since it was aware of the consequences this would have on its interests. Consequently, it worked to undermine any agreement between the opposition and the regime that involved relinquishing or handing over power, just as it thwarted the Jordanian king's attempt to broker a new Taif Agreement between the opposition and the regime.<sup>(10)</sup>

### **Economic Influence**

To cement its economic influence, Iran provided substantial support to the Syrian regime through direct loans, credit lines, massive investments and financial facilities to fund oil and related product imports. UN Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura estimated Iran's annual spending to support the regime from 2014 to 2019 at approximately \$6 billion. However, if you take into account the value of credit lines, estimated between 2011 and 2015 at \$5.87 billion,<sup>(11)</sup> in addition to the costs of recruiting foreign fighters and oil aid, ranging between \$3.5 billion \$4 billion annually,<sup>(12)</sup> Iran's total support likely far exceeded the figure stated by the UN envoy. In fact, former Chair of the Iranian Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee Heshmat Falahatpisheh revealed in 2020 that his country spent nearly \$30 billion to ensure Assad remained in power.<sup>(13)</sup>

Iran signed several commercial agreements and contracts with the Syrian regime. Among these was the conclusion of the 2013 deal to finance Syrian imports, stipulating that a substantial proportion must consist of Iranian products and be supplied through Iranian companies. In July 2013, the regime exempted Iranian companies specialized in exporting foodstuffs from duties and taxes.

Iran's economic presence was enhanced in 2017 when it secured licenses to invest in nearly 5,000 hectares to establish an oil port, as well as to modernize and operate one of the country's ports. It also invested \$300 million in a new telecommunications operator and the establishment of an oil facility in Homs. This reflected Iran's transformation from playing a limited economic role before 2011 into a prominent economic actor driven by clear strategic interests.<sup>(14)</sup>

According to the 2017 Foreign Direct Investment Report in Syria, Iranian investors ranked first in direct investment projects. Their investments focused primarily on purchasing real estate in the destroyed residential areas for which the regime allocated exclusive reconstruction tenders to them. The Iranian government encouraged its companies to purchase real estate in Syria and provided them with foreign currency credit lines to invest in this sector.<sup>(15)</sup> This was an ef-

fective way to cement its influence by creating a demographic change in Damascus and its surroundings.

Accordingly, Iran's presence in Syria yielded numerous geopolitical opportunities and capabilities. It activated its logistical support channels for its regional allies, enhanced its access to the Mediterranean Sea and became more competitive with Türkiye while counterbalancing its ambitions in the region. Furthermore, it strengthened its deterrence against Israel by demonstrating its capabilities to establish allied fronts (the Lebanese Hezbollah front, along with the Syrian front). Additionally, its intervention also created extensive investments for Iranian entrepreneurs and opened new economic avenues that circumvented the imposed economic sanctions.

### **The Strategic Paradoxes of Iranian Influence in Syria**

Although the Iranian presence in Syria appeared strong, it remained limited for several reasons, including:

#### **The Absence of the Shiite Incubator**

Shiite incubators are one of the most important pillars upon which Iran has depended on to cement its presence within its vital sphere. This is implemented through a dual strategy aimed at supporting and empowering Shiite minorities inside their countries and establishing a network of operatives within Shiite communities with direct ties to Iran, thereby enhancing its regional influence.<sup>(16)</sup>

The extent of Iran's regional influence clearly demonstrates the successes of this established strategy in Iran's foreign policy doctrine. In Iraq, where Shiites constitute the majority, Iran played a pivotal role in supporting and empowering the Shiite community, especially those who embrace the theory of Wilayat al-Faqih. This has granted Iran an entrenched influence that can be described as prominent. In Afghanistan, despite the small Shiite component — estimated at 15%-29% of the total population<sup>(17)</sup> — Iran has successfully transformed this component into an effective pressure group in Afghanistan. Conversely, Syria is devoid of a significant Shiite component. Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of the population, while Twelver Shiites and Ismailis are no more than 2% of the total population. The Alawite component constitutes only 12% of the total population and is ideologically divergent from the Shiite sect. Efforts were undertaken to align the Alawite community with Wilayat al-Faqih, as exemplified by the declarations of Musa al-Sadr and Ayatollah Shirazi in the 1970s, recognizing Alawites as Shiite Muslims — primarily aimed at providing religious support to President Hafez al-Assad and legitimizing his rule.

However, these attempts failed to engender spiritual or ideological solidarity between the two groups,<sup>(18)</sup> as the Alawites view themselves as a distinct third path within Islam, as expressed by several of their leaders, “we are not Shiite, and we reject the fatwas of the Shiite marjaya, asserting that the Alawites represent a branch of Shiism.”<sup>(19)</sup> Therefore, Iran resorted to implementing policies of reli-



gious identity and demographic change to build a Shiite base in order to secure its presence inside Syria and alter any equation that might affect its strategic interests.

These policies were implemented through two paths. The first is the dissemination of Shiism among Syrians. The second focused on the settling of Shiites from Syria's neighboring countries (Lebanon and Iraq) in areas of strategic and demographic importance to Iran.<sup>(20)</sup> According to the first path, Iran bet on spreading Shiite beliefs to secure permanent loyalty. It expanded the establishment of universities aimed at spreading Shiite ideology, with the number reaching six by 2021, five of which were founded after 2011. It also opened Shiite schools such as the Great Prophet schools, which were opened in several Syrian cities,<sup>(21)</sup> in addition to many religious seminaries, whose number rose to about 69 and 500 hussainiyyas by 2019.<sup>(22)</sup> Regarding the second path, Iran sought to settle its proxy militias by purchasing and confiscating real estate, especially in the capital Damascus and its suburbs, and in Deir ez-Zor near the Iraqi border.<sup>(23)</sup> This was accompanied by forced evacuations and the clearing of specific areas of their original inhabitants, replacing them with Shiite militias.<sup>(24)</sup>

Despite the intensive efforts made by Iran to enhance its influence in Syria, whether through proselytization or demographic change, these policies failed to yield sustainable results. Proselytization efforts were unfruitful in establishing a solid social base within the predominantly Sunni sphere. This was because the strategy relied heavily on economic tools, such as financial incentives and service provision, rather than on ideological tools based on religious persuasion and cultural integration. The settlement projects failed to build a cohesive and resilient sectarian bloc capable of exerting political and social influence. This was starkly illustrated when the Assad regime entered the phase of precipitous decline, resulting in the retreat of Iran's traditional power levers.

### **The Turkish-Russian Presence**

Iran's presence in Syria was not unilateral or unrestricted, but emerged within a competitive context involving other regional and international actors. This presence clashed with both Türkiye and Russia. Türkiye, which shares a long border with Syria, believes that instability in Syria will have repercussions on its national security and threaten its internal ethnic balance.<sup>(25)</sup>

With the outbreak of the Syrian revolution and the emergence of the growing role of Kurdish armed groups, particularly the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which controlled vast areas in northeastern Syria,<sup>(26)</sup> Türkiye perceived the Kurds as a direct threat to Turkish national security. This forced Ankara to engage in the Syrian crisis. Initially, Türkiye's policy supported the opposition and called for the regime's overthrow, with Ankara assisting numerous opposition factions.<sup>(27)</sup> However, the regime's recapture of extensive territories from these factions between 2016 and 2018 prompted Türkiye to change its approach by establishing a direct military presence. This move created a tangible barrier to Iranian expan-

sion in those areas. On the other hand, Russia viewed its presence as a vital foothold in the Middle East region. Consequently, it supplied military equipment to the Syrian regime, offered political support at the UN Security Council and voted against resolutions that would legitimize military intervention.<sup>(28)</sup>

In 2015, it intervened militarily to support the regime in confronting opposition factions by controlling Syrian airspace. It also backed the political track through conferences held under its direct sponsorship, most notably the Sochi and Astana summits. These aimed to reach a comprehensive political settlement between the regime and its opponents, preserving territorial integrity and ensuring the survival of its influence.<sup>(29)</sup>

Although Russia and Iran were aligned in their support for the regime, Russia was a competitive partner to Tehran. Recognizing the importance of maintaining a balance of power in Syria, it approved Israeli airstrikes against Iranian targets,<sup>(30)</sup> pressed for restructuring the Syrian army to diminish the power of pro-Iran militias<sup>(31)</sup> and consolidated its own economic clout through major investment contracts in the oil and phosphate sectors.<sup>(32)</sup> These moves confined Iranian influence in Syria within defined frameworks and contexts that ran counter to Tehran's strategy of control and influence.

Collectively, these actions were key factors that prevented Iran from establishing exclusive control over the Syrian interior and contributed to limiting — or more accurately — confining its influence to specific areas. This outcome was achieved through direct military intervention, diplomatic pressure or political arrangements, with Syria being an open arena for several parties, each prioritizing its own strategic interests and goals. This rendered the consolidation of a sustainable Iranian influence in Syria a profoundly challenging task.

### **The Israeli Role in the Equation**

Iran's influence in Syria has long been a persistent concern for Israel, prompting it to adopt an active deterrence policy aimed at rolling back the Iranian presence while expanding Tel Aviv's military and logistical footprint.

During his meeting with the Russian president in September 2015, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stressed that Iran's growing presence in Syria posed an existential threat to his country. He warned that Tehran's provision of weapons to Hezbollah might lead to the formation of a joint military front against Israel in southern Syria.<sup>(33)</sup> The potential merger of these two fronts would pose a significant threat to Israel. This was echoed by former Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman, who warned that any future military confrontation in the north would likely make Israel face not only an active Lebanese front but also the Syrian front, thereby facing a unified northern theater in any potential conflict.<sup>(34)</sup>

Based on this security calculation, Israel intensified its operations to degrade Iran's military entrenchment and disturb the supply routes to its proxies on the ground. This campaign heightened the challenges Iran faced in establishing a se-

cure military presence. Israel has conducted hundreds of airstrikes inside Syrian territory since early 2013, targeting Hezbollah weapons depots and supply convoys.<sup>(35)</sup>

However, these strikes were far less intense than they would become in subsequent years, as their frequency escalated sharply within a proactive framework aimed at eliminating Iranian influence and striking Hezbollah.<sup>(36)</sup> These attacks included targeting weapons depots of Iran or Hezbollah at the Mezzeh military airport near Damascus;<sup>(37)</sup> striking a military facility of the Syrian Scientific Studies and Research Center near the city of Masyaf in the countryside of Hama which was used for developing chemical weapons and advanced missiles;<sup>(38)</sup> the assassination of the IRGC adviser and the main official in charge of Iranian interests in Syria Seyed Reza Mousavi in December 2023; the January 2024 attacks on the Mezzeh area west of Damascus which killed about five senior IRGC members<sup>(39)</sup> and the April 2024 strikes on the consular section of the Iranian embassy in Damascus which killed seven IRGC members — including General Mohammad Reza Zahedi.<sup>(40)</sup>

Thus, Israeli aggression played a decisive role in diminishing Iran's ability to establish a sustainable military influence inside Syrian territory. Its regular strikes, which targeted weapons depots, senior IRGC commanders and logistical support centers, were a direct deterrent factor that hampered Iran's entrenchment and the transfer of its capabilities to allies, particularly Hezbollah. Moreover, these strikes heightened the Syrian regime's caution about excessive entanglement with Iran. The regime feared being drawn into a direct escalation with Israel, which could target its senior leadership or critical military assets, thereby diverting its exhausted forces from combating the opposition factions. Contrary to its longstanding posture, the Syrian regime went beyond merely avoiding confrontation with Israel. It took unusual steps to contain and avoid provoking it. Following exchanges of attacks between Iran and Hezbollah on the one hand, and Israel on the other, the regime refrained from its usual supportive statements for its allies.<sup>(41)</sup> It also asked the Houthi representatives to leave Damascus and closed their affiliated Yemeni embassy, and it did not stop there but also reopened the embassy of the internationally recognized Yemeni government.<sup>(42)</sup>

At its core, this approach was an additional factor that constrained Iranian influence inside Syria. It imposed limits on Tehran's military and political movements, particularly given the former Syrian regime's desire to avoid being drawn into broader conflicts that could threaten its survival. Consequently, this relative divergence of positions may partly explain Iran's lukewarm support for the regime during its fall.

In general, it can be concluded here that Iran's strategy of expanding influence in its vital periphery has overlooked the specificity of each country. While the strategies employed in both Iraq and Afghanistan were suited to their specific circumstances, they were incompatible with the Syrian state. Iran lacked a reliable Shiite base in Syria, and its intervention faced multiple challenges. Beyond

the conflict of interests with international and regional actors, its intervention incurred massive financial costs, exacerbating domestic pressures. Furthermore, it was labeled as an “occupying power” by Syrian society. The latter viewed the Iranian presence as a foreign force that must be resisted. As a result, the Syrian Revolutionary Command Council — comprising numerous military factions and civil society — declared that Syria was under Iranian occupation.<sup>(43)</sup>

### **Iranian Trajectories in Post-Assad Syria**

Iran's strategic options and potential pathways in Syria and the region post-Assad can be projected as follows:

#### **Iran's Course Toward Syria**

Iran's loss of its Syrian ally is unlikely to prompt it to accept the new reality. Recognizing the imperative to adapt, Tehran will likely seek to reconfigure its presence by adopting a new strategy aligned with emerging challenges. In the aftermath of the regime's fall, the Iranian government adopted conciliatory rhetoric, referring to the opposition forces as “armed forces” instead of “terrorists”<sup>(44)</sup> and floated the concept of a “new resistance” against Israel.”<sup>(45)</sup> However, the feasibility of this approach is unlikely in the near term, given the new Syrian government's prevailing orientations.

However, this path confronts several obstacles. Foremost is the Syrian regime's decision to distance itself from Iran, compounded by regional and international containment efforts. Moreover, Iran's acute economic crisis severely limits its capacity to engage actively in reconstruction. Consequently, this approach appears more tactical than strategic.

On the other hand, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei perceives developments in Syria as a grave threat and alluded to the rise of what he called the “honorable and strong” who are able — according to his description — to restore the prior state of affairs <sup>(46)</sup> — an implicit reference aimed at undermining the new regime.

His statements in January 2025 <sup>(47)</sup> reinforce this stance. He issued direct warnings to the new Syrian leadership, signaling a clear shift toward a policy of incitement and political pressure. This rhetoric not only aligns with Iran's strategic framework but also appears to be a means to bolster domestic morale in Iran, particularly given the negative psychological repercussions caused by the rapid fall of the Syrian regime. This event sent shockwaves through the Iranian elite and eroded the confidence of its regional allies in Iran's capacity for decisive action and influence.<sup>(48)</sup>

It can be noted that Iran's strategic trajectory toward the new Syrian regime involves efforts to undermine it and limit its ability to establish control. Among the indicators of this course are the following:

■ Withdrawing its forces and proxies from eastern Syria, particularly Deir ez-Zor, and handing over control to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). <sup>(49)</sup>

■ Its attempts to revitalize the networks of the Islamic State (ISIS) by negotiating with the SDF to hand over former elements of the group and facilitating the smuggling of weapons to its cells in the Badia region.<sup>(50)</sup> This indicates attempts to repurpose these cells to target the new government.

■ Its attempts to reconstitute proxy militias inside Syria. The IRGC reportedly has initiated a plan to destabilize Syria by supporting Iraqi Shiite groups.<sup>(51)</sup> The Syrian authority conducted security operations against these militias in Deir ez-Zor, arresting around 70 elements between June and July 2025.<sup>(52)</sup>

■ Its continued support and involvement in smuggling weapons and narcotics to Lebanon, activities which the Syrian authority confronted in areas such as Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali and al-Qusayr.<sup>(53)</sup>

Despite this, Iran's ability to undermine the Syrian regime remains limited due to several critical factors: the absence of a strategic ally (the Assad regime), whose fall eliminated the institutional structure that enabled Iran to establish military bases and extensive economic and security networks; a nominal Shiite presence inside Syria, which constraints Iran's mobilization ability compared to the Iraqi or Lebanese contexts; Iran's worsening economic crisis which imposes pressure on financing external networks and proxies; the rise of rival regional powers (Türkiye and the Gulf states); creating an effective counterbalance to Iran's attempts to reassert influence and the internal divisions within the Iranian regime regarding the alignment of priorities. This may lead to reduced funding for external operations and compel Tehran to rebalance its strategic priorities between domestic and international demands.

Iran's ability to reestablish its traditional influence in Syria has significantly diminished due to the absence of the former regime, shifting power balances and growing internal and external pressures. However, Iran will unlikely relinquish its foothold in Syria and adopt a dual strategy: maintaining open channels with the new government to prepare for potential future changes, while concurrently strengthening militia influence in the border areas, especially along the Syrian-Iraqi crossings, as a strategic pressure card. However, the key factor limiting Iran's ability to intervene will be the success of the new Syrian government in attracting international and regional support and establishing strong state institutions.

### **Iran's Trajectories and the Challenges of Repositioning in Syria and the Region**

In this regard, Iran is pursuing several pathways:

■ Seeking to rebuild its proxy network: the year 2024 marked the decline of Iran's regional influence, especially following the fall of its Syrian ally. This loss weakened the logistical capabilities of Hezbollah, which simultaneously faced intensified Israeli strikes and growing pressure from the Lebanese government to disarm.<sup>(54)</sup> Hamas faced growing pressure as Israeli operations targeted its military infrastructure and funding resources. Iran-aligned Iraqi factions expe-

rienced a notable erosion in influence amid growing pressure from the central government, while the Houthis in Yemen continued to sustain significant territorial and military losses due to the intensive US air strikes.

Despite the aforesaid, these indicators may not be sufficient to depict the complete disintegration of Iran's regional influence network. This is primarily because the structure of most elements within its proxy network relies not merely on financial or military support, but on a deeper ideological and doctrinal system. Iran built this structure upon robust ties with specific organizations such as Hezbollah, the Iraqi factions and the Houthis, which all embrace the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih.

This ideological bond explains Iran's commitment to rebuilding its network as it provides strategic depth that transcends material resources and military capabilities. The current shifts may weaken Iran's ability to finance or secure supply lines, but the ideological dimension remains as an alternative leverage to maintain the loyalty of proxies and compel them to adopt resistance-oriented policies despite inadequate support.

What distinguishes Iranian influence from conventional alliances, therefore, is its capacity for reconfiguration—anchored in ideological legitimacy as a mechanism of resilience, and in the organizational flexibility of its proxy factions as a means of repositioning rather than contraction or disintegration.

Several indicators suggest that Iran has started to rebuild its network. In January 2025, Israel accused Hezbollah of attempting to rebuild its military capabilities with Iranian support.<sup>(55)</sup> Iran reportedly deployed the Quds 351 and Jamal 69 long-range ballistic missiles to allied Shiite militias in Iraq,<sup>(56)</sup> coinciding with the Iraqi government's discussion of plans to dismantle some armed organizations. This reflects Iran's determination to maintain a strategic foothold in Iraq as a pivotal arena for securing geopolitical depth and counterbalancing Western and regional pressures.

Iran's efforts to rearm the Houthis as a core pillar of its regional axis are also evident. In July 2025, Yemeni forces seized a massive arms shipment—approximately 750 tons—comprising cruise missiles, drone engines, and warheads, all destined for the Houthis with direct Iranian support, according to security reports. US sources described this as “the largest seizure of advanced Iranian conventional weapons.”<sup>(57)</sup>

It is clear that Iran does not view its proxy network as a transient tactical tool but rather as a fundamental strategic pillar of its regional security structure and a means for pursuing its project to impose favorable regional balances. Therefore, Iran is expected to continue to exploit opportunities to provide support to elements of its network. However, its capacity to rapidly restore its network remains constrained within narrow limits, owing to complex and interlocking factors. The intelligence and military capabilities of regional adversaries — such as Israel — influence Iran's support strategies, as any attempt to enhance proxy strength risks preemptive strikes that could undermine its effectiveness. Additionally, in-



ternational political and diplomatic pressures and Iran's internal economic challenges — including liquidity crises and inflation — define the scope of Tehran's support, compelling it to balance support for its proxies with the imperative of maintaining domestic stability.

Thus, the recovery of Iran's influence network depends on a combination of limited economic possibilities, international pressure and the field capabilities of adversaries as well as the internal stability of its proxies. This renders the reconstruction process a delicate strategy that necessitates a sustained balance between available resources and field and political objectives.

Faced with these pressures, Iran has resorted to multiple adaptation strategies, most notably the promotion of proxy self-financing. This should not be interpreted as disengagement from its proxies, but rather as a reformulation of the relationship, based on relative financial independence coupled with sustained ideological and military alignment. For example, Hezbollah's financial arm Al-Qard Al-Hasan discontinued compensation payments to its members,<sup>(58)</sup> reflecting financial austerity and the group's shift toward relying on local revenues and utilizing new funding channels. Among these is a cross-border fuel smuggling network between Iraq and Lebanon, which generates annual profits worth billions of dollars.<sup>(59)</sup>

The Houthi group has also increasingly depended on domestic resources, primarily by imposing maritime tolls across the Red Sea and Gulf waters, generating about \$180 million per month.<sup>(60)</sup> The ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa are also major income channels, with the group generating about \$790 million between May 2023 and June 2024 in customs revenues.<sup>(61)</sup> Iran-backed Iraqi factions have consolidated their influence through local financial instruments, such as international loans and international payment systems,<sup>(62)</sup> while systemically integrating thousands of their elements into state security institutions to ensure sustained income and relative financial independence.

Based on the above, to speak about the breakdown of Iran's influence network sounds premature. This network has evolved into a soft structure that integrates hard tools, such as military capabilities, and soft tools, such as ideology, while increasingly relying on self-financing and alternative supply networks. Thus, the transformation affecting Iran's network is not one of collapse, but rather repositioning imposed by regional shifts and power balances. Under these circumstances, Iran is likely to entrench its presence rather than pursue unchecked expansion by redefining its relationship with its proxies to reduce costs and enhance adaptability to new developments. Expanding multilateral networks: This approach has emerged through Iran's efforts to strengthen relations with several states, most notably Russia and China. Strategic cooperation between Russia and Iran has witnessed remarkable growth over the past years, from tactical collaboration in Syria to a defense partnership evident during the Russia-Ukraine war, wherein Russia has relied on Iran for weaponry and other forms of support. Russia has also become the largest foreign investor in Iran, with cooperation extend-



ing to the storage of Russian oil inside Iranian territory and direct links between the Russian and Iranian banking systems. In addition, Russian energy companies have signed agreements to develop Iranian oil and natural gas fields.<sup>(63)</sup> This cooperation culminated in the signing of the strategic partnership agreement in January 2025, encompassing defense, trade, energy, finance, intelligence and counterterrorism.<sup>(64)</sup>

Relations with China are defined by an entrenched and expanding partnership. Iran is a pivotal element of the Belt and Road Initiative and serves as China's largest importer of Iranian oil. China regards its access to discounted Iranian oil as an integral component of its national security, prompting it to develop increasingly innovative strategies to enhance its energy security.

However, the boundaries of Russian and Chinese support for Iran were starkly exposed during the June war in 2025. In spite of rhetorical condemnation and diplomatic calls for de-escalation, neither extended tangible assistance to Tehran. Russia confined itself to condemning Israeli strikes and advocating for mediation, without activating any of the defense clauses in the agreements signed between the parties. China, in turn, pursued its traditional policy of non-intervention and only called for de-escalation and regional stability. This underscores the true nature of Iran's alliances, as tactical alliances grounded in economic and diplomatic interests, devoid of defense commitments — a reality that poses a significant challenge for Iran. This will prompt it to reassess its foreign strategy, especially as the prospect of relying on tangible support from international allies in times of need is dim.

It appears that Iran had long recognized the limits of Russian and Chinese support. This explains its pursuit of diversified international and regional partnerships and its engagement in multilateral frameworks by transforming the weak guarantees from major powers into opportunities for maneuver. For example, Iran continues work on mending its strained relations with Saudi Arabia, a process notably marked by the agreement to restore diplomatic relations in March 2023.<sup>(65)</sup> The two countries have held talks on enhancing defense cooperation, while media reports have circulated regarding the prospect of the formation of a naval alliance that would include several Gulf states alongside India and Pakistan.<sup>(66)</sup>

On a broader regional level, Iran established an expanded defense and technological alliance with Belarus through a strategic partnership agreement encompassing military cooperation and mutual economic development.<sup>(67)</sup> It has sought to strengthen relations with Central Asian states by signing several bilateral agreements. Furthermore, Tehran appears to be cultivating enhanced relations with neighboring states such as Armenia to form a regional counterbalance to Turkish influence, as well as Afghanistan, by courting the Taliban economically and militarily to prevent its territory from being used as a US base against Iran.

Iran is also pursuing further regional expansion beyond its traditional sphere. Iran seeks to expand its presence in Latin America by strengthening relations

with countries such as Venezuela, Cuba, and Bolivia, where cooperation agreements described as strategic have been signed.<sup>(68)</sup> However, these moves remain limited in their impact on the international balance of power, given the weak international influence of these countries and the challenges of establishing an effective technical or military exchange with them.

This policy, taken as a whole, reflects a deliberate shift toward “flexible balancing” in foreign relations, whereby Iran seeks to diversify its external network and expand its strategic maneuverability, thereby safeguarding its regional and international standing in the face of escalating US pressure.

■ Continued development of military capabilities: The 12-Day War between Iran and Israel, in which Iran’s nuclear facilities in Natanz, Fordow and Isfahan were hit, exposed one of the most significant security and military vulnerabilities in its modern history. While the conflict demonstrated Iran’s offensive capability and did not destroy its nuclear program nor accumulated scientific knowledge,<sup>(69)</sup> it laid bare the limitations of Iran’s defensive capability limits and the fragility of key strategic pillars in the face of US and Israeli technological and intelligence superiority.

Iran initiated a series of reviews and updates to its military strategies, including the establishment of the Supreme National Defense Council in August 2025, the first body of its kind since the Iran-Iraq War, aimed at unifying military planning and Defense Command, and the appointment of Ali Larijani as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, a move interpreted as a shift toward a more rational approach, given his experience as a moderate mediator.

Thus, it appears that Iran is moving toward a dual approach: one that combines the continued military development with the use of conditional diplomatic tools to mitigate international pressure. This reflects Tehran’s recognition that superiority is not achieved through retaliatory capability alone, but through building a sustainable capability for deterrence.

In recent years, Iran has aimed to bolster self-sufficiency in its defense industries, which was clearly demonstrated during the 2025 revolution anniversary celebrations in which it unveiled new ballistic missiles, underground missile installations, advanced drones and a high-speed naval vessel.<sup>(70)</sup>

Following the Israeli-US attack, Iran embarked on rebuilding its military arsenal, leveraging Chinese technical support for missile production materials. It procured thousands of tons of ammonium perchlorate — a critical component for solid rocket fuel — from China, a move expected to boost its manufacturing capacity by approximately 800 medium-range ballistic missiles.<sup>(71)</sup> This enhanced Iran’s military maneuverability and also its ability to support its regional allies. In July 2025, it also tested the Qasid satellite launch vehicle, which uses a blend of solid and liquid fuels,<sup>(72)</sup> reflecting its efforts to enhance the operational and industrial capabilities of rocket and drone technology.

Iran’s future vision extends beyond merely rebuilding its missile infrastructure to reinforcing nuclear deterrence as a component of its security system. It

has reorganized its scientific personnel to safeguard technical knowledge and has initiated repairs to damaged facilities. Satellites imagery in June 2025 revealed Iranian construction teams commencing urgent repair work at the Fordow nuclear facility, a key center for uranium enrichment.<sup>(73)</sup>

In a strategic shift, Iran suspended cooperation with the IAEA. The Iranian Parliament passed a bill to halt cooperation with the agency, which the Iranian president ratified in early July 2025, signaling Tehran's desire to reduce international transparency while pursuing "nuclear ambiguity" as a tool for political pressure.

According to IAEA reports, Iran possesses about 400 kilograms of uranium enriched to 60%, while the reports of the Institute for Science and International Security confirmed that this stockpile is an advanced step toward nuclear weapons capability.<sup>(74)</sup> This quantity places Tehran tangibly closer to the threshold of a latent nuclear capability, providing Iran with a strategic tool for bargaining or escalation, depending on the context.

Within this complex reality, Iran stands at a strategic crossroads, necessitating a delicate balancing act between military threats and engagement in negotiating paths that preserve its incremental nuclear and military gains. On the one hand, it seeks to build a sustainable deterrent power to influence regional security equations. It realizes that uncontrolled escalation could trigger a comprehensive confrontation — distinct in nature and scale from its previous confrontation with the United States and Israel.

Thus, Iran is likely to rebuild its leverage without crossing the threshold into full-scale confrontation. This will involve continuing to develop its missiles, which are low-cost but high-impact, and drone capabilities, while controlling the pace of its nuclear program to maintain ambiguity.

Ultimately, Iran is not moving merely toward excessive militarization, but toward constructing a flexible deterrence umbrella that integrates its military and technical capabilities and diplomatic options. If sustained, this vision could lead to new security balances in the region, although it raises the risks of escalation if negotiations fail.

## **Conclusion**

Iran's capacity to reestablish its traditional influence in Syria has significantly diminished against the backdrop of the Assad regime's fall, balance of power shifts inside Syria and growing internal and external pressures. Iran is unlikely to relinquish its Syrian foothold and pursue a dual strategy: maintaining channels of communication with the new authority, while strengthening the influence of proxy militias across the border areas as a strategic pressure card. However, the decisive factor in limiting Iran's ability to intervene will be the Syrian government's success in attracting sustained international and regional support and in building strong state institutions.

The recovery of Iran's influence network depends on a combination of constrained economic capabilities, international pressure, the field capabilities of adversaries and the internal stability of allied proxies. This renders the reconstruction process a precise strategy that requires a sustained balance between available resources and political goals. Consequently, Iran is seen shifting toward a "flexible balance" in its foreign relations by diversifying its partnership network and expanding the strategic maneuvering margin to preserve its regional and international position, amid escalating pressure. In this context, Iran is likely to recalibrate its strategic leverage without crossing the threshold of full-scale confrontation. This will be achieved through the sustained enhancement of low-cost, high-impact missile and drone capabilities, coupled with deliberate pacing of its nuclear program—maintaining maximum ambiguity to wield it as a calibrated instrument of deterrence and diplomatic coercion.

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# IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY PRINCIPLES AND THE RULES OF INTERNATIONAL LAW: A LEGAL STUDY ON POINTS OF CONFLICT AND PATHWAYS FOR ADAPTATION

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## Abstract

This study analyzes the interplay between the guiding principles of Iranian foreign policy, as stipulated in the Iranian Constitution and the peremptory norms of public international law that form the foundation for regulating international relations. Iranian foreign policy is grounded in a set of ideologically and religiously driven principles, including support for the oppressed (*mustazafin*), exporting the revolution, the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (*Wilayat al-Faqih*) and opposition to global oppressors (*mustakbirin*). These principles reflect the philosophy and objectives of the revolution in shaping Iran's foreign relations. However, they raise legal challenges when compared to binding international norms, such as non-intervention in the internal affairs of states, sovereignty, sovereign equality and the prohibition of the use or threat of force in international relations. Thus, the study examines the constitutional foundations that define the intellectual and political framework of Iranian foreign policy and evaluates the extent to which these principles align with the norms of international law — as enshrined in the UN Charter and related international agreements.

**Keywords:** Iranian foreign policy, international law, sovereignty, non-intervention, exporting the revolution, support for the oppressed (*mustazafin*), Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (*Wilayat al-Faqih*), prohibition of the use of force.

## Introduction

The 1979 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran serves as a key legal and normative foundation for the country's foreign policy orientation. It asserts a series of principles that guide Iran's external posture: a categorical rejection of all forms of oppression and domination, advocacy for the oppressed globally, avoidance of submission to major powers, defense of causes tied to the Islamic nation and a stated policy of non-interference in other states' domestic affairs except where support for the oppressed is claimed. These are specifically articulated in the preamble and in Articles 3, 11, 152, and 154 of the Constitution.

This constitutional architecture interweaves the ideological legacies of the Iranian revolution with pragmatic foreign policy aims. Legal scholars have pointed out that this blending of ideologically charged commitments with more orthodox international obligations creates ongoing tension between Iranian foreign policy actions and established norms of international law. The preamble characterizes the revolution as a global movement on behalf of the oppressed and asserts that the Constitution institutionalizes the revolution both within Iran and abroad, particularly by promoting Islamic solidarity and expanding the notion of a unified Muslim nation.

Consequently, Iran's international legitimacy, as articulated in official doctrine, is derived less from conventional legal principles and more from a foundational commitment to exporting the revolution and confronting what it deems global arrogance. Scholarship observes that this conflation of revolutionary religious authority with constitutional norms endows Iranian foreign policy with a transnational dimension. Such a paradigm may place Iran in recurring tension with principles of sovereignty and non-intervention that are essential to the international legal order.

Accordingly, the following central question emerges: to what extent do the ideological principles underpinning Iranian foreign policy align with the established rules of international law? This study approaches the issue through a comparative legal lens, systematically analyzing whether and how the foundational tenets of Iran's foreign policy run contrary to, or harmonize with, the core principles of international legal order. The investigation is designed to critically examine areas of convergence as well as potential conflict, thereby offering a nuanced assessment of coherence or tension between Iran's constitutionally mandated foreign policy ideals and universally recognized norms of international law.

## The Principles of Supporting the Oppressed (Mustazafin) and Non-interference

The principle of supporting the oppressed has been a foundational ideological and political pillar of Iranian foreign policy since the 1979 revolution. Rooted deeply in religious, intellectual and constitutional contexts, this principle emphasizes aiding populations suffering under occupation or tyranny. It derives from the Shiite concept of supporting the oppressed, and is enshrined in Article 154 of the Iranian Constitution, which states, "The Islamic Republic of Iran considers human happiness throughout human society as its ideal. It considers independence, freedom, and the governance of justice and truth as the right of all the people of the world. Consequently, while it completely abstains from any

kind of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the struggles of the oppressed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world”<sup>(1)</sup> This principle continues to guide Iran's international engagement and foreign policy decisions.

Ayatollah Khomeini, the first supreme leader of Iran, strongly endorsed the principle of supporting the oppressed, asserting that Iran must stand with all oppressed people against their oppressors.<sup>(2)</sup> His successor, Ali Khamenei, has maintained this stance, emphasizing that supporting the oppressed forms a core and unchanging part of Iran's political and foreign policy doctrine. Khamenei articulated that the revolution is committed to aiding the downtrodden and confronting global arrogance. He firmly stated that Iran's foreign policy is rooted in backing the oppressed against the arrogant,<sup>(3)</sup> which remains a fundamental and enduring constitutional principle guiding the Iranian republic's international conduct.<sup>(4)</sup>

Political factions in Iran diverge significantly on the interpretation of the principle of supporting the oppressed. “Reformists” view this support as aligning with human rights and development, adhering to established international norms and law, and explicitly reject backing armed movements that could breach these laws. Contrarily, Iran's activist foreign policy, with its interventionist tendencies rooted in revolutionary ideology, often clashes with the core international law principle of non-intervention in states' internal affairs.<sup>(5)</sup> This principle, firmly embedded in customary international law and enshrined in Article 2(7) of the UN Charter and UN General Assembly Resolution 2131 (1965), prohibits interference in domestic jurisdiction, emphasizing the sovereignty and independence of states.<sup>(6)</sup>

The 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law Concerning Friendly Relations and Co-Operation among States in Accordance With the Charter of the United Nations (General Assembly Resolution 2625) explicitly affirms that “No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State. Consequently, armed intervention and all other forms of interference or attempted threats against the personality of the State or against its political, economic and cultural elements, are in violation of international law.”<sup>(7)</sup>

Article 154 of the Iranian Constitution seeks to balance Iran's unwavering commitment to supporting oppressed peoples worldwide with a formal principle of non-interference in other nations' internal affairs. Despite this constitutional wording, Iran's foreign policy, notably its backing of non-state armed actors such as Hezbollah<sup>(8)</sup> in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, is frequently cited in UN Security Council reports as violating the sovereignty of other states and interfering directly or indirectly in their internal matters. Iran has acknowledged providing technological military assistance to the Houthis, which conflicts with Security Council resolutions.<sup>(9)</sup> Furthermore, a UN Panel of Experts has reported mounting evidence that Iranian individuals or entities supply weapons and components to the Houthis, breaching Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015).<sup>(10)</sup>

The definition of non-intervention is firmly established in customary international law, as articulated by the International Court of Justice in *Nicaragua v. United States* (1986), which found that financing, training or arming irregular forces operating within another state breaches the principle of non-intervention.<sup>(11)</sup>

In this light, the principle of supporting the oppressed can be construed as compatible with international law when limited to non-coercive forms of engagement — such as political advocacy or humanitarian assistance — that do not exert pressure on another state’s sovereign choices. By contrast, any coercive backing, including material or military assistance to insurgent or paramilitary actors, crosses the legal threshold into prohibited intervention in a state’s internal affairs.

**Table 1: Comparison Between the Principle of Protecting the Oppressed and the Principle of Non-Interference**

<b>The Iranian Constitution: Protecting the Oppressed</b>	<b>UN Charter: Non-intervention in the Internal Affairs of States</b>
<p>Preamble to the Constitution: “With respect to the Islamic content of the Iranian Revolution, which was a movement for the victory of all the oppressed people over their oppressors, the constitution prepares the ground for continuing this revolution at home and abroad.”</p>	<p>Article 2(7) of the Charter of the United Nations:  “Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter; but this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII.”</p>
<p>Article 152: “The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based [...] the defense of the rights of all Muslims.”</p>	<p>General Assembly Resolution 2131 (XX), 21 December 1965: “No State has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any State. Consequently, armed intervention and all other forms of interference or attempted threats against the personality of the State or against its political, economic and cultural elements, are condemned.”</p>
<p>Article 154: “The Islamic Republic of Iran considers human happiness throughout human society as its ideal. It considers independence, freedom, and the governance of justice and truth as the right of all the people of the world. Consequently, while it completely abstains from any kind of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the struggles of the oppressed for their rights against the oppressors anywhere in the world.”</p>	<p>Security Council Resolution 2216 (2015), April 14, 2015: Reaffirms the unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Yemen, and decides in paragraph 14 that all states shall immediately take necessary measures to prevent the direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer — to or for the benefit of the Houthis and the entities and individuals identified in the resolution — of arms and related materiel of all types, as well as technical assistance, training or financial assistance.</p>

### **The Principles of Exporting the Revolution and State Sovereignty**

The Iranian Constitution — through its preamble and Articles 3(16), 11, and 154<sup>(12)</sup> — articulates a constitutional commitment often described as “exporting the revolution,” framed as a duty toward the broader Islamic nation. In the sphere of organizing and equipping the national armed forces, the text places faith and doctrine as the foundational basis for their construction and purpose. Correspondingly, the armed forces are assigned a dual duty: not only the conventional responsibilities of safeguarding and defending national frontiers, but also the fulfillment of a declared divine mission — engaging in jihad in the path of God — and pursuing the establishment of the rule of divine law at the global level.<sup>(13)</sup>

According to the Iranian Constitution's preamble,<sup>(14)</sup> the revolution is not confined to a particular territory but extends beyond national borders to a global horizon, implying an active pursuit of ideological and political influence abroad. Khomeini articulated this principle as the “export of the revolution,” envisaging its transmission to Islamic countries to topple governments aligned with the West and replace them with authorities committed to Islamic law.<sup>(15)</sup> In 1989, Khamenei stated that exporting the revolution “is not a crime.”<sup>(16)</sup> This outlook has been echoed by establishment-aligned clerics, who advocate the rhetoric of export and maintain that the Islamic nation should adopt the Iranian revolutionary model as an exemplary paradigm.<sup>(17)</sup>

Two contrasting approaches emerged over the “export of the revolution.” One advocated peaceful export through persuasion, culture and example. The other endorsed active efforts to project the revolution's influence into the Gulf states — an approach which the Gulf governments denounced as fomenting unrest between Shiite communities and their Sunni-led governments.<sup>(18)</sup> “Reformist” currents propose a re-framing: rather than coercive export, the revolution should be conveyed as a cultural and civilizational project grounded in dialogue and soft diplomacy.

The doctrine of exporting the revolution conflicts with international law and contradicts state sovereignty.<sup>(19)</sup> Article 2(1) of the UN Charter affirms that all states are sovereign and retain exclusive authority over their internal affairs.<sup>(20)</sup> The UN General Assembly's 1970 Declaration on Friendly Relations further confirms that “Every State has an inalienable right to choose its political, economic, social and cultural systems, without interference in any form by another State.”<sup>(21)</sup>

Although Iran contends that exporting the revolution excludes military intervention and consists of supporting oppressed peoples alongside a commitment to non-intervention, international law treats any conduct exceeding non-coercive intellectual or media advocacy — such as arming, training or financing groups within another state — as a violation of sovereignty and potentially an unlawful use of force under Article 2(4) of the Charter.<sup>(22)</sup> Consequently, the two principles can coexist only if exporting the revolution is construed as limited to disseminating values, providing humanitarian assistance or undertaking security and political cooperation at the explicit invitation of the state's lawful government. Any form of armed support or involvement in internal conflicts plainly contravenes the principle of sovereignty and the rules of international law.

**Table 2: Comparison Between the Principle of Exporting the Revolution and the Principle of Sovereignty in International Law**

The Iranian Constitution: The Principle of Exporting the Revolution	UN Charter: The Principle of Sovereignty
<p>Preamble to the Constitution: “With respect to the Islamic content of the Iranian Revolution, which was a movement for the victory of all the oppressed people over their oppressors, the constitution prepares the ground for continuing this revolution at home and abroad. Specifically, it strives to expand international relations with other Islamic movements and people in order to pave the way for the formation of a single.”</p> <p>Preamble: Ideological Army: “In establishing and equipping the defense forces of the country, the focus shall be on maintaining ideology and faith as the foundation and the measure. Consequently, the Army of the Islamic Republic and the Islamic Pasdaran Revolutionary Corps are formed in accordance with the aforementioned objective. They will undertake the responsibility of not only guarding and protecting the borders, but also the weight of ideological mission, i.e. striving (jehād) on the path of God and struggle on the path of expanding the sovereignty of the law of God in the world; in accordance with the Qur’anic verse: “Against them make ready your strength to the utmost of your power, including steeds of war, to strike terror into (the hearts of) the enemies, of Allah and your enemies.”</p>	<p>Article 2(1) of the Charter of the United Nations: “The Organization is based on the principle of the sovereign equality of all its Members.”</p>
<p>Article 3, paragraph 16: “The organization of the nation’s foreign policy based on Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unrestrained support for the impoverished people of the world.”</p>	<p>General Assembly Resolution 2625 (XXV), 24 October 1970: “All States enjoy sovereign equality. They have equal rights and duties and are equal members of the international community, notwithstanding differences of an economic, social, political or other nature.”</p> <p>“Each State enjoys the rights inherent in full sovereignty.”</p> <p>“Each State has the duty to respect the personality of other States.”</p> <p>“The territorial integrity and political independence of the State are inviolable.”</p>



The Iranian Constitution: The Principle of Exporting the Revolution	UN Charter: The Principle of Sovereignty
Article 11: "...all Muslims form a single nation and the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is required to base its overall politics on the merging and unity of the Muslim nations. It must continuously strive to achieve the political, economic, and cultural unity of the Muslim world."	Article 2(4) of the Charter of the United Nations: "All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations."

### The Principles of Guardianship and Equal Sovereignty Among All Nations

Belief in the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (Wilayat al-Faqih) constitutes a foundational pillar of the Iranian republic's state architecture. Under Article 107 of the Constitution, the supreme leader occupies the paramount office established by the revolution,<sup>(23)</sup> while the president functions primarily as the implementer of the leader's directives.<sup>(24)</sup> Constitutional provisions vest the supreme leader with expansive authority — encompassing the direction of foreign policy and other consequential state decisions — most notably in Articles 110 and 111. This distinctive institutional design elevates religious authority as the principal lodestar of external relations, at times prompting the application of religious or sectarian criteria in the conduct of international affairs.

Supreme Leader Khamenei has indicated, in remarks to the Assembly of Experts, that the supreme leader's absolute authority is a flexible concept amenable to adjustment when circumstances require, though not in a manner that abandons its core substance.<sup>(25)</sup> "Reformist" factions, while accepting the doctrinal legitimacy of Wilayat al-Faqih within the constitutional order, critique the extension of its powers into the foreign policy realm insofar as this produces frictions with international law. One proposed corrective contends that enhancing the roles of the Supreme National Security Council and the Parliament in foreign policy decision-making could mitigate inconsistencies with international norms.

International law rests on the principle of the sovereign equality of states,<sup>(26)</sup> a foundation that stands above any religious or ideological claims. Accordingly, elevating religious criteria as the primary driver of foreign policy risks friction with international norms premised on neutrality and the legal equality of states. Within what may be termed a "universal guardianship"<sup>(27)</sup> conception of the revolution, the Iranian Constitution contains no clause requiring the supreme leader or the government to observe international laws and conventions, nor does it explicitly reference the UN or a duty to uphold its charter and treaties. As a result, the text does not bind the state to principles — such as good neighborli-

ness, non-intervention in domestic affairs and the safeguarding of national sovereignty — that many other constitutions expressly affirm.

If Wilayat al-Faqih is treated as an internal constitutional arrangement limited to Iran’s domestic order, it does not conflict with sovereign equality. If, however, Wilayat al-Faqih is construed as a leadership claim over the broader Muslim world, it can be read as an extraterritorial assertion that exceeds national sovereignty and runs counter to the principles of international law and accepted practices in international relations.

**Table 3: A Comparison Between the Principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist and the Principle of Equal Sovereignty**

The Iranian Constitution: The Principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist	UN Charter: The Principle Of Equal Sovereignty
<p>Preamble to the Constitution: “Based on the sovereignty of the command [of God] (velāyat-e amr) and continuous religious leadership (imāmat), the constitution prepares the background for the actualization of leadership by a qualified jurisprudent who is recognized as leader by the people (“Administration of affairs should be by those scholars who are learned in regard to God and that which He has permitted and that which He has forbidden”) this leadership protects various institutions against deviations in fulfilling their authentic Islamic responsibilities.”</p>	<p>UN General Assembly Resolution 2625 (1970):            “Each State has the right freely to choose and develop its political, social, economic and cultural systems.”</p>
<p>Article 57: “The governing powers in the Islamic Republic of Iran consist of the legislative, the executive, and the judiciary powers. They operate under the supervision of the absolute authority of the command (velayat-i amr) and religious leadership (imatat) of the community of believers and according to the forthcoming articles of this law. These powers are independent of one another.”</p>	<p>Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States (1970): “No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State. Consequently, armed intervention and all other forms of interference or attempted threats against the personality of the State or against its political, economic and cultural elements, are in violation of international law.”</p>

The Iranian Constitution: The Principle of the Guardianship of the Jurist	UN Charter: The Principle Of Equal Sovereignty
Article 5: “During the absence (ghayba) of his holiness, the Lord of the Age, May God all mighty hasten his appearance, the sovereignty of the command [of God] and religious leadership of the community [of believers] in the Islamic Republic of Iran is the responsibility of the faqih who is just, pious, knowledgeable about his era, courageous, and a capable and efficient administrator, as indicated in Article 107.”	Article 2(4) of the UN Charter: “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.”

### Confronting Global Arrogance and the Principle of Using Force

Chapter X of the Iranian Constitution articulates the core principles of its foreign policy, vigorously rejecting any form of hegemonic dominance. Article 152 explicitly affirms a policy of non-alignment with dominant superpowers, while Article 154 endorses the support of oppressed peoples in their struggles against oppressors.<sup>(28)</sup>

The principle of confronting global arrogance has been central to Iranian political doctrine since the 1979 revolution. This principle transcends mere rhetoric to function as a strategic framework guiding Iran's defense and international relations policies. It underpins the pursuit of advanced military capabilities, including ballistic missile development and legitimizes backing armed groups in conflict zones.<sup>(29)</sup>

Within Khomeini's ideological framework, supporting the oppressed and liberation movements serves as a strategy to counter global arrogance. He contended that this struggle involves direct confrontation with arrogant powers, identified as the primary source of the weakening of nations, and protection of oppressed peoples, seen as victims of a global hegemonic system.<sup>(30)</sup> Khamenei has reiterated this worldview, asserting that arrogant powers seek to obstruct Iran's scientific progress and labeling global arrogance as inimical to humanity.<sup>(31)</sup> In a speech on the National Day of Fighting Global Arrogance, Khamenei declared Iran's commitment to comprehensive readiness — militarily, politically and in armament — to confront global arrogance and the criminal regimes that dominate the world order.<sup>(32)</sup>

“Reformists” differ from “conservatives” in their approach to confronting global arrogance. “Reformists” argue that this confrontation should not involve military conflict or support for armed movements but should instead rely on negotiation, confidence-building and preventive diplomacy. Their approach is epitomized by the nuclear agreement reached under Rouhani's government,

which sought to reconcile Iran’s nuclear rights with its obligations under international law.

However, this approach stands in tension with the principle prohibiting the use of force, as enshrined in Article 2(4) of the UN Charter. This article restricts the use or threat of force to cases of legitimate self-defense<sup>(33)</sup> or actions authorized by the Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. Moreover, persistent threats of force against UN member states can themselves constitute violations of this provision. The UN General Assembly, through Resolution 3314 of 1974, defines aggression as “...the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations.”<sup>(34)</sup>

The principle of confronting global arrogance may be framed domestically as a political and moral duty; however, in practice, it has often translated into support for armed movements beyond Iran’s borders. International law views such support — when it involves arming, training or financing armed groups<sup>(35)</sup> — as tantamount to indirect use of force or unlawful intervention. Iran’s expansive interpretation of confronting global arrogance effectively permits the use or threat of force outside international legal frameworks, particularly through backing non-state armed groups against recognized states. This practice constitutes a clear breach of Article 2(4) of the UN Charter, which prohibits the use of force, and Article 3(g) of UN General Assembly Resolution 3314 (1974), which defines acts of aggression.<sup>(36)</sup> Though Iran asserts that its support for resistance movements aligns with peoples’ right to self-determination, this justification does not exempt it from the UN Charter’s prohibitions on the use of force.

**Table 4: Comparison Between the Principle of Confronting Arrogance and the Prohibition of the Use of Force**

The Iranian Constitution: The Principle of Confronting Forces of Arrogance	UN Charter: The Principle of Banning the Use Of Force
Preamble to the Constitution: “The Council of Experts, consisting of the representatives of the people, completed the task of writing the constitution. [It] is written with the hope that this will be the century of the universal rule of the oppressed and the defeat of all the oppressors.”	Article 2(4) of the Charter of the United Nations: “All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.” Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations: “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security.”

The Iranian Constitution: The Principle of Confronting Forces of Arrogance	UN Charter: The Principle of Banning the Use Of Force
<p>Article 3, paragraph 16: "The organization of the nation's foreign policy based on Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unrestrained support for the impoverished people of the world."</p>	<p>General Assembly Resolution 2625 (XXV), 24 October 1970: "Every State has the duty to refrain from organizing or encouraging the organization of irregular forces or armed bands including mercenaries, for incursion into the territory of another State."</p> <p>"Every State has the duty to refrain from organizing, instigating, assisting or participating in acts of civil strife or terrorist acts in another State or acquiescing in organized activities within its territory directed towards the commission of such acts, when the acts referred to in the present paragraph involve a threat or use of force."</p>
<p>Article 152: "The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on the rejection of any kind of domination, both its exercise and submission to it; the preservation of the all-inclusive independence of the country and its territorial integrity; the defense of the rights of all Muslims; non-alignment in relation to the dominating powers; mutual peaceful relations with nonaggressive states."</p>	<p>General Assembly Resolution 3314 (XXIX), 14 December 1974: "Aggression is the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Charter of the United Nations, as set out in this Definition."</p>
	<p>Article 3(g) of General Assembly Resolution 3314 (1974): "Any of the following acts, regardless of a declaration of war, shall, subject to and in accordance with the provisions of article 2, qualify as an act of aggression: The sending by or on behalf of a State of armed bands, groups, irregulars or mercenaries, which carry out acts of armed force against another State of such gravity as to amount to the acts listed above, or its substantial involvement therein."</p>

### Outcomes and Necessities of Adaptation

This study found that the Iranian Constitution emphasizes that the principle of protecting the oppressed should be aligned with national and international standards. However, in practice, there is a gap, as this principle is often overshadowed by violations of the prohibition against intervention and the use of force.

While the principle of exporting the revolution in its cultural or ideological sense does not inherently violate sovereignty, executing it through direct or indirect intervention — especially by supporting non-state armed groups — constitutes a violation of the sovereignty of other states, as affirmed by UN resolutions and the International Court of Justice.

Regarding the doctrine of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist (Wilayat al-Faqih), it remains compliant with international law when understood as an internal system defining Iran's governance. However, if promoted as a transnational authority or as a justification for intervention in other countries' domestic affairs, it conflicts with the principle of sovereign equality explicitly set forth in Article 2(1) of the UN Charter.

The principle of confronting global arrogance, while foundational in Iran's political rhetoric, can encompass political, economic and intellectual resistance. Yet, if it shifts toward armed support or proxy military operations, it directly conflicts with the prohibition of force, except in cases of legitimate self-defense or UN Security Council mandates.

For Iran to align its policies with international law, it must establish clear standards limiting support for humanitarian aid or human rights advocacy, reinterpret revolutionary principles peacefully and ensure its actions are consistent with its legal obligations under the UN Charter and international treaties. Furthermore, it needs to adopt a balanced diplomacy that combines its revolutionary-Islamic identity with its commitments under international law. Such a recalibration could help Iran reconcile its revolutionary message with its international duties, stabilizing regional and global relations and reducing internal and external conflicts.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the fundamental principles of foreign policy enshrined in the Iranian Constitution and articulated by its leaders are deeply value-driven and ideological. However, their practical implementation often conflicts with key tenets of international law, particularly the principles of sovereignty, non-intervention and the prohibition on the use of force. While international law permits Iran to freely determine its internal political system and promote a discourse of resistance or moral leadership, it strictly forbids actions such as arming, funding or training armed groups outside its territorial jurisdiction or asserting transnational control.

The challenge for Iran lies in reinterpreting these principles to ensure full compliance with its international obligations, emphasizing peaceful, diplomatic and humanitarian approaches. Doing so would bolster the political system's legitimacy at home and prevent violations of peremptory norms of international law. Such a strategic recalibration could help Iran sustain its regional influence while maintaining its legal standing in the international community, thereby mitigating ongoing internal and external tensions.



## Endnotes

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# LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORKS AND ECOLOGICAL THREATS TO THE RED SEA

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## Abstract

The Red Sea's marine environment holds vital significance as a critical commercial corridor for global trade, linking the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean via the Suez Canal, with its stability directly impacting global economies. It holds a wealth of natural resources, such as natural gas and fish, and hosts a unique ecosystem with immense biodiversity, while also being a major global tourism destination. However, the Red Sea's marine environment faces significant challenges, including pollution from increased shipping traffic, urban and industrial expansion, climate change impacts, oil pollution and unsustainable tourism activities. These factors threaten coral reefs, biodiversity and food supply chains. Despite the existence of relevant international and regional legislation and policies, their effectiveness remains questionable due to varying state capacities for compliance and the need for enhanced coordination, monitoring and implementation mechanisms. This study analyzes the legislative framework for protecting the Red Sea's marine environment, identifying key challenges to compliance and exploring opportunities that effective implementation of these frameworks could offer for regional cooperation and achieving sustainable development goals. In doing so, it provides a critical analysis aimed at formulating practical insights to strengthen the protection and sustainability of the Red Sea's marine environment for future generations.

**Keywords:** Red Sea, environmental legislation, environmental, institutional and economic threats, organizational and institutional dilemma for the Red Sea's environment.

## **Introduction**

The Red Sea is one of the most significant and strategic marine environments worldwide as the waterbody spans the coastlines of eight countries — Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Jordan, Palestine, Djibouti and Eritrea. Parallel to its ecological value, particularly its coral reefs, which rank among the most climate-resilient globally, the Red Sea serves as a vital economic artery for the region. However, in recent decades, it has come under increasing environmental pressure, including pollution from surging maritime traffic, plastic waste, industrial discharge and unsustainable economic activities such as overfishing and unregulated coastal development. Other exacerbating factors include climate change through rising sea temperatures, elevated sea levels and the growing phenomenon of ocean acidification. Nation states are unable to address these threats independently, given their scale and complexity, underscoring the urgent need for unified regional cooperation and harmonized environmental legislation and policy frameworks. Along with these challenges, concerns persist with regard to the effectiveness of regional legislative frameworks largely due to disparities in national capacities and the need for enhanced coordination, monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

This study addresses these concerns by examining the current threats, evaluating existing international and regional policies and legislation, and assessing the effectiveness and potential evolution of legal frameworks to mitigate environmental risks in the Red Sea.

## **Definition of Terms**

Addressing environmental policy in the Red Sea requires a clear understanding of several foundational concepts:

### **Coastal Environment**

This refers to land areas adjacent to seas or oceans that are significantly influenced by maritime conditions, including climate, livelihoods and cultural practices. Coastal environments vary in area and form due to tides, river mouths, bays and shallow waters, and are affected by waves, climate change, pollution and air currents. The ecological sensitivity necessitates protective measures to preserve biodiversity and environmental sustainability.

### **Marine Environment**

This encompasses all saline water — seas and oceans — and their ecosystems and living organisms. Covering roughly 70% of the Earth's surface, marine environments are essential for ecological balance, food security, natural resources and climate regulation. However, they face mounting threats from pollution and human activities, hence, demanding concerted conservation efforts.

### **Regional Environmental Protection**

This denotes collective actions, policies and agreements adopted by coastal states to safeguard shared ecosystems.<sup>(1)</sup>

### **Environmental Legislation and Policy**

This includes national laws and international or regional agreements that regulate human activities and mitigate their negative impacts on marine environments.

### **Legal Framework for Marine Environmental Protection**

This framework comprises international agreements and national legislation, notably the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), which obligates states to protect marine environments. It also includes initiatives under the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) such as the Barcelona Convention for the Mediterranean and the Jeddah Convention for the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. National laws further regulate maritime navigation, industrial activities and marine resource extraction to prevent pollution and ecological degradation.

The global framework for marine environmental protection is based on the policies and regulations of three key entities:

#### ***The United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)***

It promotes marine conservation through regional seas programs and agreements such as the Mediterranean Action Plan, which implements the Barcelona Convention.

#### ***Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC)***

A UNESCO body that fosters international cooperation in ocean science to enhance understanding and sustainable management of marine environments. It coordinates programs in ocean monitoring, tsunami early warning and supports initiatives like the UN Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030).

#### ***International Maritime Organization (IMO)***

A UN agency responsible for developing international maritime law and regulating marine transportation to ensure sustainability, reduce pollution and assess national compliance with relevant legal frameworks.<sup>(2)</sup>

### **Environmental Threats to the Red Sea**

Until recently, the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden region remained relatively unaffected by the environmental changes observed in other parts of the world. However, rapid development — particularly in the industrial and tourism sectors along with the growing oil production and transportation sectors — has triggered a wave of coastal expansion that poses serious risks to natural ecosystems. These pressures have been

further exacerbated by political instability and regional conflicts, which have had a direct and detrimental impact on the marine environment.

The most prominent threats and challenges can be outlined as follows:

### **Environmental Challenges**

The Red Sea's strategic location as a global shipping corridor has led to a significant increase in maritime traffic. This surge contributes to oil spills, which represent one of the most serious threats — especially in critical areas such as the Bab al-Mandab Strait and near the ports of Jeddah and Port Sudan. The gravity of this risk is heightened by escalating regional conflicts and political instability, which draw on the marine ecosystem. Among the most concerning developments are incidents involving the targeting and sinking of oil tankers, resulting in large-scale contamination of Red Sea waters. A notable example occurred when the Houthis attacked commercial ships transiting the Red Sea as part of their maritime campaign in support of Gaza during the Israeli military offensive.<sup>(3)</sup>

Another major threat to the Red Sea is plastic pollution. Plastic waste significantly contributes to the degradation of marine ecosystems. Some studies estimate that over 60% of the waste collected along the Red Sea's shores is plastic. In fact, the figure may be even higher: a 2019 BBC report indicated that up to 90% of the waste in the Red Sea consists of plastic, with plastic fragments found in the stomachs of many fish species. Nevertheless, the Red Sea remains one of the cleanest seas in the world, with relatively low concentrations of floating plastic compared to other oceans.

Industrial and agricultural wastewater also pose serious risks. These discharges introduce nutrient pollutants and heavy metals into the marine environment, threatening the health of coral reefs and accelerating eutrophication. Agricultural runoff is particularly high due to the widespread use of flood irrigation, although some of it is reclaimed for treatment and reuse. Industrial wastewater, while comparatively smaller in volume, is often treated on-site or discharged into public drainage systems. However, it remains the primary source of wastewater and presents a significant environmental hazard due to its high content of organic matter and chemical residues.

Climate change constitutes another critical threat, manifesting in several forms. The first is the rise in sea surface temperatures, which contributes to coral bleaching and the degradation of mangrove forests — both of which are vital to the Red Sea's unique biodiversity. This biodiversity underpins the region's ecotourism industry, a key source of income for coastal countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. The second manifestation is rising sea levels, which threatens densely populated coastal cities like Jeddah, Port Sudan and Aden. It also poses risks to tourism and urban development projects along the Red Sea coast, especially in the absence of proper environmental impact assessments. The third concern is the increasing acidification of ocean waters, which weakens the ability of

marine organisms to form calcium-based structures and disrupts the formation of marine food chains.<sup>(4)</sup>

Finally, there is a notable absence of an effective mechanism for environmental data exchange and monitoring. This is largely due to the lack of an integrated marine monitoring network encompassing all Red Sea countries, as well as the weakness of early warning systems for pollution incidents and natural marine disasters. Additionally, enforcement and regulatory mechanisms remain limited in some countries due to institutional and political challenges.

### **Economic Challenges**

Economic challenges have accumulated, posting an increasing threat to the Red Sea's marine environment. The first issue is the rise of unsustainable tourism activities. Coastal expansion — through resorts, ports and recreational diving — has placed significant pressure on sensitive biodiversity habitats, strained coastal resources and led to increased waste generation. The second factor relates to the acceleration of oil and gas activities. The expansion of petroleum exploration and the growth of maritime transport have heightened the risks of marine pollution and oil spills, with any such incident carrying significant economic costs. The third challenge involves the underutilization of renewable marine resources. For example, the abandonment of ecotourism and sustainable fisheries in favor of potentially polluting activities reflects a missed opportunity for environmentally friendly economic development. The fourth issue concerns the high cost of protecting the marine environment. Implementing clean technologies or marine waste management plans is often viewed as a short-term economic burden due to its financial demands. Finally, there is the unsustainable management of economic activities. Overfishing continues to deplete fish stocks, disrupt ecological balance and weaken marine food chains.<sup>(5)</sup>

### **Institutional Challenges**

At the forefront of these challenges is the multiplicity of authorities responsible for protecting the Red Sea's environment. Within each national government, several ministries and agencies — such as those for tourism, environment, transport, petroleum and fisheries — share overlapping mandates. This often leads to jurisdictional conflicts, especially in the absence of strong regional coordination mechanisms. The problem is further complicated by differing national priorities: while some countries emphasize economic development (ports, oil and tourism), others focus more on environmental protection.

This is also linked to weak technical and human capacities. There is a notable shortage of trained personnel in environmental monitoring, marine surveillance and protected area management. There is also a gap in engaging the private sector and civil society — most current policies lack genuine partnerships with the private sector in funding or implementing sustainability projects. Additionally, some countries suffer from limited participation of civil society and local re-

searchers, which reduces the effectiveness of public oversight and pressure on decision-makers. Most importantly, there is a lack of sustainable funding and over-reliance on externally funded projects rather than national resources, given the limited budgets allocated to the environmental sector in the region's countries. The scarcity of funding and disparities in economic capacities among some countries — showing less willingness to invest in pollution control technologies or monitoring — lead to the absence of sustainability in funded activities and programs.

### **Geopolitical Challenges**

The competition among neighboring regional ports poses a major challenge to those located along the Red Sea. These ports are located in areas of high strategic and geopolitical value, attracting the attention of both regional and international powers seeking to safeguard their economic and military interests. This dynamic has had a direct impact on the security of the region. The influx of investments from various powers along with revenues from leasing military bases have supported the economies of some Red Sea Basin countries already burdened by poverty and economic hardship.

Moreover, the intensity of this competition — coupled with conflicting interests among these powers — has exposed the region to proxy conflicts, which significantly undermine regional stability.

Additionally, ongoing regional and border disputes further complicate the situation. The Red Sea is a geopolitically sensitive area, and any political tension can weaken environmental cooperation and hinder the implementation of international agreements. Despite formal accession and signing of such agreements, actual commitment and enforcement vary across countries due to these conflicts, which cast a shadow over the entire region. Political and economic instability in some coastal countries also obstructs the development of coordinated and effective environmental policies.<sup>(6)</sup>

### **Legislation and Policies Regarding the Red Sea**

Global attention to marine environments began with the London Conference held in 1954 whose most significant outcome was the development of the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution of the Sea by Oil. As the first international agreement aimed at combating oil pollution in marine waters it had a major influence on the legislation of many countries, prompting most to incorporate provisions into their domestic laws prohibiting the discharge of oil from ships into their territorial waters. In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm. It was the first global conference dedicated to environmental issues where discussions focused on establishing laws and principles to protect the environment from human harm. One of the key outcomes of this conference was the decision to establish the UNEP. Since then, environmental issues have become an integral part of the international



agenda and the need for legislation to keep pace with the evolving nature of environmental challenges has grown. These legislative efforts aim to address the previously mentioned goals and challenges.

Another milestone was the 1973 London Conference, which resulted in the International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL). This marked a significant step toward addressing all sources of ship-related pollution. The convention included specific provisions regarding the construction of oil tankers, requiring designs that help reduce pollution — such as the use of segregated ballast tanks (SBTs). These tanks serve as counterweights to maintain the ship's stability and are designated for holding water during return voyages when the tanker is empty.

The most important international frameworks can be summarized as follows:

### **The UNCLOS**

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is considered the cornerstone of international maritime law. It obligates signatory states to protect marine environments, particularly in areas beyond national jurisdiction such as the high seas and the deep seabed. Adopted in 1982 and entered into force in 1994, the convention is often referred to as the “Constitution of the Oceans,” serving as the global legal framework governing all activities in oceans and seas. The UNCLOS defines the rights and responsibilities of coastal countries in the exploitation of marine resources and environmental protection and provides the foundational principles that guide Red Sea countries in safeguarding their marine ecosystems.

The convention plays several roles, including:

- **Delimitation of maritime zones:** The UNCLOS defines and clarifies the rights and obligations of states within various maritime zones — such as territorial seas and exclusive economic zones — granting them the sovereignty and jurisdiction necessary to manage maritime resources and protect their environments.

- **Environmental protection obligations:** Signatory states are bound by a general obligation to protect the marine environment and to enact legislation aimed at preventing pollution from various sources, including ships and land-based activities.

- **Promotion of regional cooperation:** The convention encourages states to collaborate on protecting shared marine environment, which is vital for semi-enclosed seas such as the Red Sea.<sup>(7)</sup>

### **The MARPOL**

International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships (MARPOL) is one of the most important international treaties for protecting marine environments from pollution caused by ships — oil, chemicals, sewage, solid waste and air emissions. Adopted in 1973 and later amended through the

MARPOL 78 Protocol, which merged the original convention with its protocol, the combined agreement entered into force in 1983.

Under the MARPOL Convention, the Red Sea is designated as a “Special Area” according to its annexes, particularly Annex 1 which addresses the prevention of oil pollution. This designation imposes strict regulations on the discharge of pollutants in the region due to its environmental sensitivity and unique biodiversity. For example, the discharge of oil waste or harmful liquid substances is prohibited within 12 nautical miles of the nearest land. Ships operating in the Red Sea are required to use waste treatment technologies and comply with inspection standards and environmental certification requirements.

The convention holds particular importance for the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden for several reasons:

■ **Geographical and economic significance of the Red Sea:** The Red Sea holds global strategic importance as it encompasses two of the world’s most critical maritime chokepoints: the Suez Canal and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. These passages are vital for international trade, facilitating the transit of thousands of ships annually — particularly oil and gas tankers. This high volume of traffic significantly increases the risk of oil pollution and marine spills. Therefore, the implementation of the MARPOL Convention standards in the region is essential to minimizing the likelihood of environmental disasters.

■ **Protection of unique ecosystems:** The Red Sea is rich in coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangroves — ecosystems that are highly sensitive to oil and chemical pollution. As such, the MARPOL provisions concerning the discharge of ballast water, oily waste and garbage from ships play a vital role in preserving the region’s unique biodiversity.

The MARPOL Convention seeks to establish binding international standards and mechanisms to prevent marine pollution from ships. Its significance for the Red Sea region lies in its role as the first line of defense against pollution resulting from heavy maritime traffic. This helps ensure the sustainability of the marine environment and protects the economic interests of coastal countries. Accordingly, strengthening regional cooperation under MARPOL can lead to:

■ **Enhanced monitoring of foreign vessels.**

■ **Reduction of pollution incidents and economic costs:** Implementing MARPOL protocols lowers the risk of major pollution incidents that could harm coastal tourism or fisheries. Avoiding environmental disasters also helps minimize economic losses.

■ **Strengthening national and regional capacities:** The accession of Red Sea countries — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan, Djibouti and Eritrea — to the MARPOL Convention encourages the development of port facilities for ship waste reception. This contributes to improving the efficiency of regional ports and aligning them with global standards.<sup>(8)</sup>

### **The Basel Convention**

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes (1989) focuses on regulating and controlling the conditions for transboundary movements and disposal of hazardous wastes. It complements other key environmental treaties, including the Stockholm Convention (2001) on Persistent Organic Pollutants and the Rotterdam Convention (1998) on the trade of chemicals and pesticides. The importance of the Basel Convention for the Red Sea lies in its role in preventing the transfer of hazardous waste into the region and ensuring its safe disposal. This helps protect human health and maintain the integrity of the marine ecosystem. As a global agreement, the Basel Convention supports regional marine environment protection efforts through its regional centers and by promoting cooperation among coastal states in managing cross-border waste.

The convention contributes to protecting the Red Sea environment through:

- **Hazardous waste reduction:** Member states must minimize transboundary movements of hazardous waste and ensure that any such transfers occur safely, protecting both human health and the marine environment.

- **Safe disposal framework:** The convention provides a legal structure to guarantee the proper disposal of hazardous and other wastes, reducing the likelihood of their entry into Red Sea waters.

- **Human Health and ecosystem safeguarding:** This is done through shielding the marine environment from the harmful effects of hazardous waste, thus supporting long-term ecological sustainability and public health.

- **Regional cooperation enhancement:** The Basel Convention reinforces regional initiatives — such as the Jeddah Convention — by establishing centers for technology transfer and knowledge-sharing in hazardous waste management, enabling coordinated action among coastal states to protect the Red Sea.

- **Effective implementation mechanism:** As operational platforms for enforcing the convention, Basel's regional centers strengthen stronger compliance and awareness of its significance and facilitate support in affected areas, including Red Sea countries.<sup>(9)</sup>

### **Regional Legislation and Frameworks on the Red Sea**

A review of regional legislation governing the marine environments of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden reveals that it centers on the Jeddah Convention of 1982. This convention paved the way for the establishment of the Regional Organization for the Conservation of the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (PERSGA) in 1995 — the executive arm responsible for implementing and monitoring the activities and programs under the convention's framework.

The organization is mandated to carry out a range of tasks, including:

- **Coordinating regional efforts to develop strategies and protocols for marine environmental protection and oversee the implementation of the 1982 Jeddah agreement and its associated protocols.**

■ Conducting marine environmental monitoring, promoting biodiversity and raising environmental awareness by enhancing national capacities through training, workforce development and technical expertise.

■ Organizing training programs as well as preparing and executing environmental regional action plans aimed at confronting shared environmental challenges.

■ Collecting environmental data and developing systems for monitoring, while encouraging public participation in marine resources protection.

■ Advancing regional initiatives focused on biodiversity conservation, fisheries management, coral reef protection and marine pollution control.

■ Enhancing international cooperation through connecting the region to global initiatives and programs related to oceans and marine environments.

■ Encouraging scholarly papers to support maritime decision-making in member states.

As the Red Sea region faces shared transboundary threats such as marine pollution, depletion of marine resources and overfishing, the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) initiated the Programme for the Environment of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (PERSGA) in 1974 in collaboration with the UNEP as part of the Regional Seas Programme. To support this initiative with a legal framework, the Regional Jeddah Conference of Commissioners for the Protection of the Marine Environment and Coastal Areas of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden was held from February 13-February 15, 1982 in Jeddah. The conference led to the signing of the Jeddah Convention of 1982 with key objectives. These included protecting the regional marine and coastal environment, preventing and combating all forms of pollution, preserving ecosystems such as coral reefs, mangroves, and seagrass beds, coordinating emergency response among member states and promoting scientific and technical cooperation and information exchange.

The conference also issued the “Action Plan for the Conservation of the Marine Environment and Coastal Areas of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden.” Like other international and regional agreements, the Jeddah Convention is legally binding for member states, but it does not contain specific procedures or standards for individual issues. Therefore, the mechanism for developing and adopting accompanying protocols allows countries to agree on targeted measures for specific environmental concerns.

The convention, its protocol and the action plan entered into force in August 1985. The contracting parties to the Jeddah Convention are Jordan, Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Somalia, Egypt and Yemen.

In accordance with Article III of the Jeddah Convention, the PERSGA was established under the Cairo Declaration to oversee the implementation of the convention and its protocols. The PERSGA has developed several complementary protocols, each addressing a specific area of the convention:

- Protocol concerning regional cooperation to combat oil and other harmful substance pollution in emergency cases.

- Protocol for the protection of the environment from land-based activities. This includes industrial and domestic wastewater.

- Protocol on the conservation of biological diversity and the establishment of a network of protected areas. This is to preserve biodiversity and safeguard marine ecosystems.

With the increase in maritime traffic and offshore oil extraction, the need arose for a specialized center capable of coordinating rapid responses to pollution incidents and providing equipment and technical expertise to affected countries. As a result, the Emergency Marine Center (EMERSGA) was established in Hurghada, Egypt, in 2006 with support from the IMO and the Global Environment Facility (GEF). In parallel with these efforts, memoranda of understanding were signed with relevant regional and international organizations, including the ALECSO, the Regional Organization for the Protection of the Marine Environment (ROPME), the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ICESCO), the UNEP, the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-Based Activities and the IMO. In addition, a Regional Action Plan for Marine Emergency Preparedness was developed in cooperation with the IMO and adopted by PERSGA member states.<sup>(10)</sup>

## **Legislative and Regulatory Challenges in the Red Sea**

### **The Challenge of Harmonizing International and Regional Legislation**

International and regional agreements serve as primary sources from which national legislators derive legal principles. At the same time, they represent some of the most effective tools for establishing the foundations of national environmental laws. The agreements ratified by countries in the region provide a framework for standardizing methods of assessment, risk analysis and evaluation of threats to various components of the ecosystem. These agreements have clearly influenced the environmental laws and regulations of the region. It is well established that, despite their international or regional nature, the general legal principles contained in such agreements become part of a country's domestic law once the agreement is ratified and published in its official newspapers. At that point, these principles become legally binding and are applied in the same way as other national legal provisions. In fact, they complement domestic laws related to the subject matter of the agreement. In cases of conflict between the provisions of the agreement and national law, the agreement takes precedence.

However, in practice, the effective implementation of these agreements often requires the enactment of national laws and regulations that operationalize their provisions — particularly in the case of framework agreements. It is important to clarify that the provisions of an agreement do not carry legal weight unless

they are formally enacted and enforced. This requirement can delay or hinder the agreement's ability to achieve its intended objectives.<sup>(11)</sup>

### **The Challenge of Regional Cooperation**

Given the abovementioned multifaceted environmental challenges and the geographical characteristics of the Red Sea — as a semi-enclosed body of water — the waterbody is particularly vulnerable to pollution and its accumulation, especially due to limited water exchange with the open oceans. These challenges are beyond the capacity of any single country to address alone, making it imperative to take effective collective steps to protect the Red Sea's environment. The existence of legal texts and international commitments does not, in itself, guarantee the protection of the marine environment unless these texts are translated into practical measures supported by robust institutional and regulatory capacities. Global experience shows that even the most precise and stringent laws remain insufficient without institutions capable of enforcement and mechanisms for monitoring and oversight that ensure actual compliance on the ground.

In this context, there is a noticeable regional shortfall in effective cooperation and coordination. For example, there is no regional environmental data bank to facilitate the exchange of expertise and information. Such a platform would help consolidate scattered environmental data from various countries and research institutions into a unified system, making it more accessible and preventing duplication of efforts aimed at supporting decision-making. Moreover, the availability of accurate and up-to-date data plays a critical role in helping policymakers adopt evidence-based decisions regarding the management and protection of marine resources and the monitoring of environmental changes. By tracking long-term environmental indicators — such as water quality, coral reef health, marine biodiversity, and pollutant levels — and promoting scientific research, researchers and academics gain access to reliable, ready-to-use data. This facilitates environmental studies and enhances the quality of published research on the Red Sea.<sup>(12)</sup>

### **Institutional Gaps and Lack of Enforcement Mechanisms**

Despite the vital role played by the PERSGA — particularly in conducting studies, training personnel and coordinating among member states — it lacks strong executive powers or binding authority to compel countries to take strict measures. This is compounded by the absence of a specialized regional arbitration mechanism for environmental disputes, which limits the effectiveness of law enforcement. Therefore, there is a pressing need to strengthen the institutional role of the PERSGA to encompass aspects of maritime security and legal enforcement.

Moreover, the organization lacks subsidiary mechanisms for regional coordination similar to those used in the Mediterranean under the Barcelona Conven-



tion. That framework operates through specialized regional centers distributed across Mediterranean countries, each responsible for managing and implementing activities in a specific environmental domain. Establishing similar mechanisms in the Red Sea would help ensure balanced implementation of the Jeddah Convention.<sup>(13)</sup>

### **Weak Early Warning Systems and Slow Legislative Updates**

Environmental risk monitoring in the Red Sea remains below the required level, with several areas still lacking legislative coverage. There is no comprehensive marine environmental code that addresses all components of the integrated ecosystem and its threats. This calls for continuous legislative review in light of emerging environmental developments such as the blue economy, blue carbon, plastic pollution, underwater noise and fisheries management. Additionally, it is essential to enhance joint maritime surveillance capabilities among regional states through mechanisms such as patrols, early warning systems and information exchange. Advanced technologies should be leveraged, as the legal framework provides an opportunity for countries to collaborate in using modern tools like satellites and drones to monitor illegal activities and detect water pollution — strengthening enforcement capacity.<sup>(14)</sup>

### **Absence of Accountability Mechanisms**

There are no deterrent tools or regional environmental courts to uphold the principles of responsibility and accountability. No compensation is required from those who cause environmental harm. It is therefore crucial to establish environmental compensation principles in line with the “polluter pays” doctrine. Countries that have not yet established environmental courts or prosecution units should be encouraged to do so, as these specialized bodies would alleviate many of the challenges litigants face in ordinary courts. The formation of such courts would naturally involve environmental experts, ensuring scientifically sound understanding of environmental disputes and more accurate rulings. Likewise, environmental prosecution units staffed with specialists would be better equipped to apply environmental principles during investigation, enforcement and damage assessment — leading to fairer compensation in environmental violations.<sup>(15)</sup>

In addition to the lack of accountability, there are also no incentives. While penalties are a necessary component of legal enforcement, introducing rewards and incentives can help establish complementary social values that encourage compliance. Regional states should give this issue greater attention and incorporate it into environmental legislation — embedding principles of incentives and rewards for environmentally compliant behavior as a balanced counterpart to punitive measures and as a pathway to more effective enforcement.<sup>(16)</sup>

In sum, addressing environmental threats in the Red Sea suffers from gaps in effective cooperation — particularly in legislative and regulatory domains.



There is an urgent need to translate regional cooperation principles into actionable plans for pollution control and biodiversity protection. Coral reefs, in particular, represent one of the most inspiring success stories in the Red Sea. In May 2025, the entire Red Sea coral reef area was declared a protected natural reserve, marking a major step toward sustainable development. This designation enables countries to advance their blue economies — such as sustainable tourism and fisheries — within their exclusive economic zones, striking a balance between development and environmental protection.<sup>(17)</sup>

## Conclusion

The mere existence of national legislation and international or regional agreements concerning the protection of the marine environment in the Red Sea is clearly not sufficient to achieve the desired level of protection. The effectiveness of this legal framework remains contingent upon the presence of strong regulatory institutions and strict enforcement mechanisms that ensure actual implementation. Institutional and administrative shortcomings often lead to the paralysis of legal provisions, rendering them incapable of addressing the rapidly evolving environmental challenges driven by human pressures, economic activities and escalating climate threats. Thus, the absence of effective institutional and regulatory capacities constitutes a fundamental gap that weakens the ability to safeguard the marine ecosystem in this vital region.

Accordingly, any serious approach to protecting the marine environment in the Red Sea must begin with a comprehensive review and modernization of existing legislation to align with scientific and environmental developments. It must also incorporate robust enforcement and oversight mechanisms that reflect the nature of emerging challenges. This effort requires strengthening national and regional institutional structures and equipping them with the human, financial, and technological resources necessary to perform their roles efficiently. In addition, long-term strategic plans should be devised based on principles of transparency, accountability and public participation.

Regional coordination among Red Sea coastal states is essential for addressing shared risks, especially given the transboundary nature of marine pollutants and activities that impact ecosystems. Involving the private sector and civil society in protection efforts enhances implementation effectiveness and fosters a sense of collective responsibility toward marine resources. Furthermore, integrating modern technologies in monitoring, tracking, and analysis provides a solid scientific foundation to support decision-makers and improves response mechanisms to environmental crises.

Finally, legislation and agreements are a necessity but insufficient condition for marine protection. Their effectiveness depends on being supported by capable institutional and regulatory systems, along with practical policies that can adapt to environmental developments. Therefore, protecting the marine environment in the Red Sea ultimately hinges on serious political will, regular legislative review and the activation of strict mechanisms that ensure real-world enforcement — guaranteeing the sustainability of this vital resource for present and future generations.

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# DECLINING FRENCH INFLUENCE IN THE SAHEL: STRATEGIES AND REPERCUSSIONS

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the factors and consequences of declining French influence in the Sahel region following the military coups in countries such as Chad, Mali and Niger, and the adoption by new military elites of a policy of disengagement from Paris. The significance of this study stems from examining the fundamental shifts affecting France's interests and historical influence in the region in light of a rising wave of hostility among both the public and the new military elites toward Paris, as well as regional transformations and crises impacting the stability of these states, alongside the growing presence of international actors seeking to expand their influence as alternatives to France. The study concludes that internal and external shifts in the Sahel region are the primary drivers of France's declining influence, with strategic and geopolitical implications for France's role not only in the Sahel but also in the global arena.

**Keywords:** Sahel, France, coups, influence, geopolitics, Chad, Mali, Niger

## **Introduction**

Military coups across Mali, Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso have triggered geopolitical realignment in the Sahel. These upheavals coincide with intensifying international competition challenging French dominance. Rising powers compete for African investment opportunities whilst internal regional crises persist from post-independence legacies. New military leaders have seized this moment to distance themselves from previous elites, leveraging domestic pressure and international dynamics to build alternative alliances. Chad's Military Council expelled French diplomatic missions and demanded the dismantling of French military bases. The Sahel states are actively cultivating new partnerships aligned with their development interests. These developments represent a calculated shift away from French influence. The transitions significantly strain France's political performance domestically and weaken its international standing, reflecting a broader erosion of French power in Africa.

Based on the foregoing, the study poses the following question: To what extent can France adapt to the variables of the local and international environments in order to restore its influence in the African Sahel region? To answer this question, the study hypothesizes that the growing degree of political instability in the Sahel countries constitutes a decisive factor in the turnover of ruling elites, serving as a significant indicator of the extent of French influence in the region. It further hypothesizes that international powers have contributed to structural changes in the dynamics of influence and dependency, thereby curtailing French influence in the African Sahel. The analytical framework comprises three dimensions. First, historical analysis traces the origins of French dependency relationships and mechanisms sustaining the French presence. Second, an examination of recent military coups explores the motivating factors and the consequences for French influence. Third, assessment of French strategic responses addresses efforts to recover regional influence whilst managing internal economic pressures and domestic political fractures.

## **France's Relations With the Sahel Nations — Underlying Contexts**

The African Sahel region occupies a vital geographical location and holds considerable strategic importance. This region has maintained special significance for France throughout both the colonial period and beyond. The region's nature and strategic value to France can be understood through the following factors:

### **The African Sahel and Colonial Legacy**

The African Sahel region<sup>(1)</sup> derives its name from the coastal strip bordering the Sahara Desert, positioned between North African countries and the equator. This strip functions as a geographical divide separating North Africa from sub-Saharan Africa. The Sahel's geographical boundaries remain contested among researchers, with varying definitions depending on disciplinary perspectives.

Geographers, anthropologists and sociologists employ different criteria in defining the region. If climate-based classifications predominate, large portions of Algeria, Libya and Egypt fall within the Sahel designation. Conversely, if ethnic and racial distribution frameworks guide analysis, the region extends to include areas from sub-Saharan countries such as Nigeria, Guinea and Senegal. This definitional ambiguity reflects the region's transitional character and the analytical complexity of studying the Sahel's diverse geographical, climatic and demographic characteristics.

However, geopolitical consensus identifies the Sahel region's core countries as the five nations that established the G5 Sahel group in 2014: Mali, Niger, Chad, Mauritania and Burkina Faso.<sup>(2)</sup> This study focuses on four of these countries, excluding Mauritania, as the decline of French influence is not directly linked to Mauritania's trajectory as it is with the other countries examined.

The region is rich in natural resources including gold, phosphate, oil, uranium and rare minerals. However, the Sahel has endured decades of chronic political, social, economic and security crises. These crises stem from structural factors rooted in post-independence state formation. Sahel countries, like other African nations, confront fundamental challenges regarding borders drawn by France and colonial powers according to strategic interests, disregarding social dimensions. This legacy has generated persistent conflicts between states and ethnic groups distributed across multiple territories, complicating relationships with central authorities. Additionally, disputes over land and water rights, particularly along border regions, have fueled intertribal and interethnic tensions. These overlapping conflicts reflect the region's complex demographic composition and the institutional fragility inherited from the colonial period, which continues to undermine state capacity and regional stability.<sup>(3)</sup>

These conflicts undermined political stability, compounded by governments' inability to formulate development policies prioritizing state-building, civil coexistence, national integration and crisis management addressing desertification, famine and population stabilization. Harsh climatic conditions and recurring droughts intensified the crisis, creating geographical population imbalances linked to ethnic affiliations and regional identities, which generated identity crises within these states.

Development policies were formulated according to political elites' affiliations, establishing preferential and unequal regional arrangements. Elites favored their ethnic groups over others, as exemplified in northern and southern Mali and across Africa generally. This deepened social and political tensions, driving migration toward major cities where populations sought improved living conditions. In the absence of equitable social policies and robust industrial-economic structures capable of absorbing labor, these cities became centers of acute social disparities and sectarian, tribal and ethnic divisions, intensifying existing tensions and creating new vulnerabilities within the urban social fabric.

The structural weakness of the state bureaucratic apparatus in the Sahel region impeded the achievement of distributive justice among different societal segments. Statistics reveal that 80% of Chad's population lives on less than a dollar daily, while 60% of Mali's and Niger's populations live below the poverty line.<sup>(4)</sup> This endemic poverty eroded local communities' confidence in political authorities, many of which assumed power through military coups. Concurrent environmental threats — desertification, drought, widespread poverty and high illiteracy rates — compounded institutional fragility.<sup>(5)</sup>

This situation spawned numerous security risks through the proliferation of terrorist groups and separatist movements fueling organized crime, particularly drug trafficking originating from South America. Narcotics transited through West African ports before reaching Europe, establishing the Sahel as a critical trafficking corridor. The region simultaneously became a conduit for illegal immigration toward Europe via North African countries. Consequently, the Sahel emerged as a primary security concern for European and North African governments, perceived as a source of regional instability and transnational threats.<sup>(6)</sup>

### **Subordination-driven French Clout**

France categorized African countries into four distinct groups based on economic utility and strategic value. The first group comprises resource-rich nations, including Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Gabon and Cameroon, which are valuable for their natural and energy resources. The second group encompasses countries with vital geostrategic locations but limited wealth, possessing resources such as gold and uranium, with Niger as a primary example. The third group includes resource-poor nations geographically distant from France, such as Benin and Madagascar. The fourth group comprises African countries within the spheres of competing international powers, including the UK and Spain.<sup>(7)</sup>

According to this classification, Sahel countries ranked among France's African priorities, as the Sahel region and North Africa constituted France's vital sphere of influence. Following the colonial period, Paris maintained regional control through economic agreements and military cooperation treaties established with Sahel countries during the independence phase.<sup>(8)</sup>

France institutionalized the French language and culture as mechanisms ensuring elite loyalty to Paris. French language and culture functioned as the primary instruments guaranteeing the allegiance of Sahel elites. This cultural connection facilitated economic and military agreements, which consistently took precedence in policy implementation. France managed local administrative structures and governance through these cultural-institutional frameworks. Consequently, Sahel countries reliably supported France within the Francophone League and voted alongside France in UN forums. This cultural-linguistic infrastructure created institutional dependencies subordinating Sahel state interests to French strategic objectives, establishing enduring asymmetries in postcolonial Fran-



co-Sahel relations and embedding French influence within governmental, educational and diplomatic structures throughout the region.<sup>(9)</sup>

France leveraged language and culture to penetrate post-independence political systems, maintaining regional influence. Post-independence elites safeguarded French interests and influence, yet periodic political and military leaders challenged this imposed relationship. These leaders recognized that interdependence<sup>(10)</sup> based on formal agreements disproportionately benefited France at the expense of African interests. Tensions and disagreements periodically surfaced regarding Franco-African arrangements, though such conflicts typically resolved quickly through negotiation. This pattern reflected the enduring structural imbalances in Franco-Sahel relations, in which French institutional and cultural dominance constrained Sahel governments' strategic autonomy. While resistance movements emerged sporadically, they remained contained within existing frameworks of dependency, preventing the fundamental restructuring of Franco-African relationships until military coups fundamentally altered the regional balance of power and elite calculations regarding French engagement. France's hegemonic relationship with Sahel ruling elites generated tensions between populations and political systems. Citizens blamed the prioritization of French interests over national interests for persistent social problems. Elites dependent on external legitimacy lacked internal legitimacy, constraining their capacity to respond to popular demands contradicting French interests. During periods of unrest and protest, governments employed violence against populations while relying on French diplomatic protection in international forums.

### **Military Coups and Declining French Clout**

Military cooperation between Sahel countries and France declined precipitously, marking a transition toward estrangement. France maintained 10 military bases regionally before military leaders ordered French force withdrawals from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The French military presence faces complete erasure upon the withdrawal of the remaining French personnel from Chad, who had participated in Operation Barkhane, designed to counter Sahel regional insurgencies. This military disengagement produces significant repercussions and strategic challenges for France that merit examination across multiple dimensions.

### **The Deterioration of Economic Relations With the Sahel Nations**

Following Captain Assimi Goïta's military coup in Mali on August 18, 2020, Franco-Malian trade entered a period of decline. According to French Customs Directorate statistics, bilateral trade decreased 6.7% compared to 2023, totaling 340 million euros. French exports to Mali followed a gradual descending trajectory, declining to 327 million euros. Mali's imports from France decreased by 23%, declining from 20 million euros in 2023 to 12.4 million euros in 2024. French Ministry of Finance estimates indicate that Mali's imports of French

goods and equipment contracted significantly in 2024. Agricultural material imports declined by 17%, while mechanical and electrical equipment imports decreased by 9%.<sup>(11)</sup>

France's imports from Mali declined by 39%, with natural resources accounting for the bulk of the decline. Gold imports fell 65%, declining from 20 million euros in 2023 to 12.4 million euros in 2024. Agricultural and fishing product exports decreased approximately 18%. Development cooperation, traditionally structured through loans benefiting French companies, experienced a significant contraction. France suspended its development cooperation program with Mali due to diplomatic tensions with the military junta. Estimated development aid for 2021 totaled 40 million euros before suspension. France implemented this aid suspension as a retaliatory response to the Malian military leadership's decision to reduce bilateral trade and restrict Mali's imports of French goods and services to historically unprecedented low levels.<sup>(12)</sup>

Since its independence in 1958, Chad has experienced recurrent military coups and security crises, generating persistent political instability throughout successive governing periods. Clashes between the regular army and opposition movements — the Front for Change and Accord in Chad (FACT) and the Military Command Council for the Salvation of the Republic (CCMSR) — resulted in President Idriss Déby's death. Déby had assumed power in 1990 through a military coup with substantial French support. Following the May 2021 security events, Déby assumed the presidency, established a Military Council and announced an inclusive national dialogue with opposition forces. The ruling military elite subsequently terminated French military cooperation agreements following intensifying terrorist attacks and expanding regional instability.<sup>(13)</sup>

Bilateral trade between Chad and France declined significantly. Chad's imports of French goods decreased from 131 million euros in 2015 to 79 million euros in 2022. Conversely, French imports from Chad increased despite political turmoil and diplomatic tensions, rising from 40 million euros in 2015 to 397 million euros in 2022. Oil accounted for 95% of total French imports from Chad, supplemented by forest products, cotton and other minor commodities. This asymmetrical trade pattern — where France substantially increased resource extraction from Chad while Chad reduced French goods imports — reflects resource dependency dynamics. France's strategic interest in Chadian oil remained compelling despite deteriorating diplomatic relations, whereas Chad's reduced imports of French goods signaled deliberate economic reorientation.<sup>(14)</sup>

Niger's bilateral trade patterns mirror those of Mali and Chad. French exports to Niger have declined substantially in recent years. According to the French Ministry of Finance reports, French exports decreased from 127.2 million euros in 2019 to 78 million euros in 2023. Conversely, French imports from Niger increased from 51.3 million euros in 2019 to 170.6 million euros in 2023. Extracted mineral resources — uranium and gold — accounted for 98.4% of total French imports from Niger. This pronounced trade asymmetry reflects France's intensified re-

source extraction from Niger despite deteriorating diplomatic relations. Niger's reduced imports of French goods signaled deliberate economic diversification away from French commercial dependence, whereas France's continued prioritization of Nigerien uranium and gold acquisition demonstrates persistent resource extraction interests irrespective of political realignment.<sup>(15)</sup>

Franco-Nigerien cooperation agreements through the French Cooperation Agency (AFD) totaled 590 million euros, within public procurement frameworks benefiting French companies as direct investments. 46% of these funds were allocated to the Nigerien general budget subsidies. In 2023, financial aid disbursed as loans to French companies conducting economic operations in Niger reached 800 million euros, benefiting 60 French firms engaged in Niger. This development assistance structure functioned as a mechanism of French influence, enabling the French Ministry of Finance to influence Nigerien public policy formulation. These arrangements constituted direct intervention in Niger's sovereign affairs, leveraging financial dependence to shape governance outcomes.<sup>(16)</sup>

Following Niger's military coup and subsequent diplomatic tensions, Franco-Nigerien cooperation ceased and French companies suspended operations. The Military Council mandated that French company reentry be subject to individualized arbitration and scrutiny, signaling recognition of systemic political and financial corruption. This requirement prompted comprehensive investigations into financial allocations, project management procedures and fund disbursement methodologies. The military leadership utilized this investigative process to expose how development assistance had functioned as a vehicle for corruption benefiting French and Nigerien elites, thereby delegitimizing the entire Franco-Nigerien cooperation framework. Bilateral relations deteriorated substantially. The French embassy suspended operations in Niger. France's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued travel warnings to its citizens and Western nationals, cautioning against traveling to Niger due to kidnapping risks.<sup>(17)</sup>

France's increased imports of Chadian oil and mineral resources reflect price renegotiations rather than an expansion in quantities. France continues importing from Sahel countries despite unprecedented diplomatic tensions due to forward-contracted oil sales agreements concluded for medium-term periods. Both parties maintain commercial engagement despite political deterioration: France requires energy resources amid global supply constraints, while Sahel countries preserve export revenues essential for economic functioning and political stability.

The decline in bilateral trade produces asymmetrical consequences for both actors. Chinese and Russian regional expansion has enabled Sahel countries to offset French withdrawal, reducing dependency pressures and diversifying external partnerships. This geopolitical vacuum-filling by alternative powers simultaneously strengthens Sahel negotiating positions and diminishes French regional leverage. Conversely, France confronts urgent strategic imperatives to

counteract withdrawal repercussions and stop influence erosion amid intensifying competition from rising powers.

### **Negative Repercussions for the French Home Front**

France, already hit hard by the economic disruptions of the coronavirus pandemic, faced a further downturn in its key macroeconomic indicators. Just as it sought to recover from the global crisis, the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war intensified these difficulties. Pressured to join Western sanctions spearheaded by the European Union and the United States, France was subsequently cut off from Russian gas supplies. At the same time, a series of military coups in the Sahel forced France to withdraw its forces, weakening its diplomatic foothold in the region.

For several reasons, France's position on the Sahel coups and its plans for military intervention became key factors behind the deterioration of its relations with the region and the sharp drop in French exports there. This worsened France's domestic economic troubles, as lower exports forced a number of French companies to close and put their employees on technical unemployment. The resulting strain on the trade balance increased the country's debt burden, pushing the French government to seek alternative measures to restore economic and financial stability.

At the same time, France's dependence on energy imports has become more problematic as its influence in the Sahel wanes and Russian gas supplies remain cut off, adding to its domestic pressures. While France continues to import gas, uranium and other vital minerals from the Sahel, the military authorities there have revoked the preferential pricing previously granted to France and ordered the arrest of numerous French companies accused of financial misconduct. These developments have further deepened France's financial and political troubles.

In response to Russia's suspension of gas exports, France began importing shale gas from the United States but faced higher shipping costs than pipeline deliveries from Russia. The increased energy costs put additional strain on the national budget, leading to higher service prices and a growing domestic deficit. To offset these financial pressures, the French government raised the value-added tax on energy services from 0.55% to 20% starting in October 2025.<sup>(18)</sup> Meanwhile, experts warn that France's public debt has now passed the three trillion euro mark and continues to rise by 5,000 euros every second, as stated by Prime Minister François Bayrou. Economically, this situation suggests a substantial risk of a major payments deficit unless urgent corrective actions are implemented.

France's public appears unwilling to accept reforms that would intensify hardship, instead blaming successive governments' mismanagement — a charge the political opposition has seized on as it threatens to unseat those in power, risking a fresh domestic crisis. On one side, the authorities face pressure to enact swift, far-reaching economic and social measures to curb soaring debt and avert potential insolvency; on the other, the public aligns with the opposition in resisting

any encroachment on core rights, raising the prospect of renewed unrest reminiscent of the Yellow Vests movement.<sup>(19)</sup> Within governing circles, a prevailing view holds that decisions by Sahel military elites — and the erosion of France's leverage and interests there — are central to today's predicament, prompting a push to reopen channels with the region to help contain domestic strains, even as officials acknowledge the path will be fraught.

### **The Challenges Facing France in Reclaiming Clout in the Sahel Region**

French influence in the Sahel now confronts overlapping hurdles tied to France's domestic strains, the region's volatile politics, rotating military-led leaderships and the assertive moves of competing powers. These dynamics intersect amid broader geopolitical rivalry and its spillover into sub-regions, turning the Sahel into a focal battleground for major players such as France, the United States, China and Russia, alongside regional actors like Türkiye.

### **France's Internal Political Crisis**

Foreign policy, long treated in political science as an outgrowth of domestic politics, relates the primary obstacle to any French resurgence in the Sahel to France's own continuing internal turmoil. Strains on the state budget and mounting public debt have hampered the performance of successive governments, undermining political stability and weakening their capacity to confront surging living costs and eroding purchasing power. The recent legislative elections, which delivered a victory for the New Popular Front, did not yield a coalition or a shared program with other winning forces. Breaking with French political convention, President Emmanuel Macron formed a government drawn from outside the victorious parties; rather than bridging divides, this move consolidated the winners' cohesion, mobilizing a unified opposition to his allies in the National Assembly.<sup>(20)</sup>

Political frictions in the National Assembly intensified after the president continued to sideline party stalwarts, appointing Michel Barnier to form a government in September 2024. Many of the chamber's leading parties treated the move as an unprecedented provocation, and fissures in domestic unity widened as inter-party disputes deepened inside the legislature. Opposition forces then mobilized public and political opinion around the gravity of the situation, casting it as a breach of democratic norms in France.

The Barnier cabinet proved short-lived, toppled in a historic no-confidence vote led by left-wing forces from France Unbowed and the New Popular Front,<sup>(21)</sup> alongside the far-right National Rally—the first such ouster since 1962. Macron then tapped Defense Minister Sébastien Lecornu to form a government, but his effort collapsed within days amid the same political gridlock. These upheavals unfolded against a backdrop of budgetary strain and attempted austerity, with fiscal pressures spilling into domestic politics and constraining foreign policy,

particularly in Africa where France's influence has waned in the face of intensifying competition in the Sahel and hostile public sentiment toward its presence.

### **Popular Rejection Within the Sahel Nations**

Mounting public opposition to a military footprint in the Sahel has become a central obstacle to any French comeback, reflecting a broader backlash against French influence. Many now regard French bases as props for corrupt regimes and as vestiges of historical dominance, blaming France's presence for stalled development and worsening socioeconomic conditions. Protests in the capitals of Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso amplified this sentiment, pushing the ruling military councils to adopt the street's demands to safeguard their legitimacy and stability. As public and governmental views converged, leaders began recalibrating their political courses and strategic partnerships, accelerating a new phase of regional competition with both local and international dimensions. The Alliance of Sahel States reflects leaders' heightened recognition of shared threats — from armed groups to the perceived weight of French influence — amid a turbulent post-uprising landscape marked by regime collapses in Libya and Sudan, widening security vacuums, rampant arms flows and outside interventions. This shift signals a new outlook among the region's ruling elites, who openly bristle at France's political, economic and security footprint and its legacies, recasting partnerships and priorities through a sovereignty-first lens. Against this backdrop, the rise of right-wing and far-right forces in France, with their anti-immigration rhetoric, reverberates across Sahel societies closely tied to France through migration and history, amplifying public hostility and complicating any French return. The result is a tightening alignment between Sahel street sentiment and state policy under the Alliance of Sahel States, accelerating new regional competition with both local and international dimensions that curb Paris' room for maneuver.

### **France's Rivals Entering the Region**

Regional military and political elites in the Sahel have leveraged great-power rivalry to advance their own agendas, fully aware of France's urgency to regain influence and the fluid geopolitical terrain. Rather than relying on Paris, they have diversified ties toward China, Russia and Türkiye — actors that present fewer political conditions and emphasize sovereignty, making their offers more attractive to juntas and new elites.. What sets some of these powers (especially China and Türkiye) apart is their adoption of approaches fundamentally different from the French model. Both countries position themselves in the Sahel primarily through soft power, emphasizing economic cooperation, highly competitive access to African markets and the establishment of economic and commercial investments with African governments. They do so by offering long-term loans on attractive interest terms or by implementing mutually beneficial projects. This strategy has enabled them to secure major infrastructure contracts,



military procurement deals, and broader understandings, all while scrupulously respecting the national sovereignty of local governments and refraining from imposing political conditionality — in stark contrast to France.

The Sahel states have also pursued hard-power options as they diversify partnerships, responding to acute security threats by deepening military ties with Russia — first via the Wagner Group and later the Africa Corps — while securing equipment and arms to bolster their forces. These arrangements aim to support operations against terrorist factions, including the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad in Northern Mali (MNLA), as well as to counter incursions by armed groups active between southern Libya and northern Chad.

Russia, facing what it views as France's openly adversarial posture, has adopted a forward-leaning strategy that projects competition into Paris' traditional spheres of influence, aiming to disrupt French and broader Western interests wherever possible. In tandem with a broad alignment with China on international issues, Moscow has pushed deeper into the Sahel, cultivating economic and military ties with ruling elites and pursuing a course designed to constrict access to energy resources for France and its partners. Initiatives like the Russia-Africa summitry have underpinned this outreach, prompting regular visits by African leaders — including from the Sahel — to expand trade and defense cooperation.

French influence suffered a profound blow when the President of Chad demanded the departure of French forces from its territory, followed shortly thereafter by the complete severance of diplomatic relations with France. Meanwhile, Russian Wagner Group units have been deploying across the region with the explicit authorization of the military governments. The Chadian junta leader's decisions coincided with similar measures in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>(22)</sup> These steps were taken against the backdrop of France's stance on the military coups: Paris called on ECOWAS to intervene militarily to restore civilian rule in Niger, categorically rejected the legitimacy of the Sahelian military coups and refused to recognize the resulting military councils. In response, the military leaders of these countries decided to withdraw from ECOWAS—an organization that had become plainly evident as operating under direct French influence.<sup>(23)</sup> They subsequently formed a new alliance named the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). These developments have severely weakened the French presence in the region and led to the closure of numerous channels of communication and cooperation.<sup>(24)</sup>

France's once-dominant edge in Sahel infrastructure, defense sales and market access has eroded amid intensifying competition from Russia and China, squeezing commercial opportunities and, by extension, narrowing France's diplomatic reach. This shift aligns with a broader realignment in which Sahel governments pivot toward alternative partners and financing, accelerating Paris' military drawdown and diminishing its leverage in regional forums.

Seen through a wider geopolitical lens, developments in the Sahel mirror global power contests that increasingly shape France's foreign policy choices, with resource access, security provision and supply routes becoming levers in a multi-



polar struggle. As Russia and China entrench via security assistance, mining and infrastructure deals and political outreach, they redraw competitive boundaries in ways likely to influence the contours of an emerging international order.

France and Russia have taken sharply divergent positions on numerous issues. Whereas France has moved decisively to provide material and diplomatic support to the United States and the Ukrainian president, aligning itself closely with Washington – particularly in imposing sanctions on Russian interests and citizens – Paris has done so in the expectation of reciprocal backing. Specifically, France has sought support within the European Union for measures designed to constrain its adversaries in Africa, beginning with a market that remains vital for French goods and a strategic supplier of natural gas. At the same time, France has hoped to secure US assistance in tightening the screws on the Sahel states, with the explicit aim of curbing the expanding presence and influence of China, Russia and Türkiye in the region.

### **France's Strategies to Reclaim Clout in the Sahel**

France, seeking to reclaim waning influence over African markets and resources following the political and economic fallout across the Sahel region, is pursuing a dual-track strategy. Internationally, it is aligning with Washington in backing Ukraine against Russia, pushing commercial pressure on China and joining efforts to weaken the tacit Russia-China alignment that challenges its position in the Sahel. Regionally, Paris is working to consolidate EU unity against Russia while drawing remaining European states closer to NATO, aiming to tighten geographical and security constraints on Moscow.

### **The Strategy of Interdependence and Joint Interests With the United States**

At the international level, France persists in urging European Union member states to extend both diplomatic and military support to Ukraine in its confrontation with Russia, notwithstanding Paris's clear recognition that—given Ukraine's limited military capabilities—Kyiv stands little realistic chance of defeating the Russian armed forces or even regaining the territories Moscow has occupied, including the Donbas region, Donetsk, Kherson and other provinces and cities now under firm Russian control. The French stance on the Russia-Ukraine war thus remains closely aligned with the official US policy, the central objective of which is the sustained strategic weakening of Russia.

France's close alignment with the US position can be theoretically understood as following the US' strategic vision, which remains deeply inspired by Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory.<sup>(25)</sup> Through NATO, Washington seeks to bring the remaining European states into an expanding orbit that ultimately feeds into the EU—a bloc effectively co-directed by Germany and France, which together define its broad policy lines. From the other side, sustained pressure is applied to ensure that existing EU member states adhere to a unified Euro-Atlantic line. In essence, this means a deliberate eastward enlargement of Europe aimed at incor-

porating Eastern European countries, particularly those along Russia's borders, under the banner of the liberal-capitalist model of freedom and rights.

### **The Strategy of Applying Pressure via the EU**

France is pressing for tighter EU sanctions on Russia — freezing state and oligarch assets and closing financial and energy loopholes — in order to weaken Moscow's capabilities in Europe and globally, while also constraining China's momentum by undercutting a key partner and supply chain link. By backing measures on energy, finance and shipping, Paris calculates a knock-on effect that blunts Russian and Chinese economic and diplomatic reach in Africa, including the Sahel.

Accepting that a rapid restoration of its Sahel sway is unlikely, Paris is shifting the pressure theater to Eastern Europe, where alignment with Washington over Ukraine serves a broader aim of straining the Russia-China axis that underpins Sahel juntas' new partnerships. The expectation is that sustained transatlantic pressure on Moscow — and, indirectly, on Beijing — will heighten internal and external pressures on Sahel military regimes, erode their patronage networks and eventually reopen space for French influence.

France's alignment with Washington on Russia and China dovetails with EU sanctions that freeze Russian state and oligarch assets and tighten energy and finance channels, even as this shift has driven Europe — and France — toward costlier US LNG to replace lost pipeline gas. The result bolsters US interests in the medium term, with record US LNG exports to Europe and elevated import costs for EU buyers, while France's strategic flexibility narrows amid tariff frictions and trade-war risks.

The protracted conflict in Europe has granted the United States additional strategic latitude in its confrontation with China, enabling it to advance its interests under all available circumstances. Chief among these has been the ability to export shale gas to Europe—and to France in particular—at record prices. The same dynamic does not apply to France, whose electricity generation relies predominantly on nuclear power. Although France has experienced fluctuations in uranium supplies, its procurement from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan has remained uninterrupted. Nevertheless, a significant portion of its uranium continues to come—on highly favorable terms—from mines operated by the French company Orano in northern Chad, near the Malian border. These operations now face mounting difficulties, as the prospect of their suspension has emerged following the decision by Chad's Transitional Military Council President, Mahamat Idriss Déby, to review and recalibrate the export prices of uranium destined for France in full alignment with his country's national interests.

### **Conclusion**

France's desperate efforts to recover its influence in the African Sahel are encountering formidable and deeply intertwined internal and external obstacles,

which have collectively led to a marked erosion of its presence and sway in the region. The rapid succession of military coups that swept through the region in a short timeframe serves as yet another indicator of the French decision-making elite's profound misreading of the broader shifts occurring across Africa. Chief among these shifts has been the rising collective awareness among the region's populations, who have grown increasingly conscious of the harm inflicted by French military and political engagement, as well as by Paris's longstanding relationships with traditional ruling elites. The grave consequences of these dynamics have transformed the Sahel into an arena of conflict for diverse armed groups, further accelerating the decline of French influence.

Internationally, Paris has knitted its stance to US priorities — on Ukraine and toward China — seeking reciprocal backing on sanctions and legal pressure against Sahel military leaders, but the alignment has carried economic and diplomatic costs and narrowed strategic room for maneuver. France's choices against the coup pathway and its association with traditional elites undercut its local standing while contributing to turbulence at home — where repeated government crises and fractious parliamentary politics signal deeper strain in the state's decision-making core.

On another level, France has effectively adhered its own interests to the vagaries of international politics, reducing its role on the global stage to that of a functional ally of the United States, particularly in matters concerning Washington's rivalries with Russia and China. Its unwavering alignment in the Russia-Ukraine war has carried significant economic and diplomatic costs for France itself. The underlying rationale for this French approach lies in a tacit *quid pro quo*: Paris stands firmly with Ukraine against Russia in exchange for US backing in imposing economic and judicial sanctions on the military leaders of the African Sahel states.

France's strategic choices in confronting the wave of coups in Africa proved ill-fated, particularly its decision to stand resolutely by the traditional elites. These elites, despite commanding abundant resources and potential, had consistently failed to deliver adequate development to their people. Far from stabilizing the situation, Paris's posture triggered domestic repercussions that profoundly unsettled the French political landscape and strained its internal front. Since foreign policy is ultimately a reflection of domestic realities, the current state of France's home front (marked by the rapid succession of governments in a short period, coupled with sharp ideological clashes among parties within the National Assembly) points unmistakably to a deep political crisis at the very apex of the French power structure.

The intensifying international and regional competition in the Sahel, together with its direct repercussions on the French economy, has significantly aggravated France's domestic political crisis. French diplomacy has proven incapable of countering these mounting challenges; on the contrary, its interests have been seriously damaged and its influence steadily eroded. In the current context,

France appears unable to fundamentally alter its policy toward the region's military elites, as any such reversal would amount to a public admission of strategic retreat on multiple fronts — a retreat that has, in fact, already begun with several African states demanding the suspension of military cooperation with Paris. This leaves France facing a high-stakes dilemma with only two viable, albeit highly risky, paths: The first consists of leveraging European and especially US aid packages as political leverage to pressure Sahel military governments into reversing their decisions; or attempting to re-infiltrate the region by covertly supporting insurgencies against the current juntas and installing new leaders more compliant with French interests — a course that both Russia and China (each seeking alternative markets and resource shares, the latter at least under a formally win-win economic logic) would resolutely block. The second, more overtly militarized and intelligence-driven option would involve backing counter-coups to overthrow the existing military elites. Any such intervention, however, would encounter fierce opposition from local populations already deeply resentful of French military presence and political influence.

## Endnotes

- (1) The name “Sahel” in Africa is not tied to a seacoast, as common usage might suggest, so much as to the “shore” of the Great Sahara in its northern expanse — that is, to its boundary and the end of its reach. This description may also imply that the area was once a sea in the distant past, especially given the scattered remains of aquatic creatures’ skeletons across the region’s vast deserts. Associated with this geographical designation are cultures, ethnicities and even languages — such as Swahili — which took its name from the term for “coast.” Notably, this label does not appear among Arab historians and travelers or other African inhabitants; most manuscripts refer instead to “Bilād al-Sūdān” (the Lands of the Blacks) and “Bilād al-Mūr,” from which “Mor-italia” arose to denote North Africa before the name came to apply to the modern state of Mauritania, for example. It appears that the term “Sahel countries” emerged with the Western colonization of the region. For more details, see: JeanLoup Amselle, “D’où Vient le Terme ‘Sahel,’” *Afrique XXI*, (February 26, 2025), accessed March 12, 2025.
- (2) Jean-Marc Chataignier, “Sahel et France, Enjeux d’une Relation Particulière” (The Sahel and France: Stakes in a Special Relationship), *Hérodote*, no. 172 (1st quarter 2019): 123. [French]
- (3) The complexities of this issue prompted the Organization of African Unity in 1964 to unanimously adopt a resolution recognizing the borders inherited from the colonial era, in order to avoid conflicts over redrawing boundaries. Nevertheless, problems persisted related to disparities in development among different regions within a single state, whether due to tribal affiliations, the weakness of the bureaucratic apparatus that took over governance after independence or limited resources. This produced a sense of lacking national belonging among certain population groups — what is known as a crisis of national integration — as occurred with the Tuareg in northern Mali after independence. For more details, see: Chataignier, “Sahel et France,” 128.
- (4) Mouloud Amoura, “French Intervention in the Sahel: A Study of Dimensions and Strategies,” *Journal of Legal and Political Sciences* 12, no. (September 2021): 834. [Arabic].
- (5) Bouyebia Nabil, “French Intervention in Mali and the Future Scenarios of the Tuareg Crisis: Between Securitization and Afghanization,” *Journal of African and Nile Basin Studies, Arab Democratic Center* 1, no. 1 (March 2018): 148, <https://www.democraticac.de/?p=52985>. [Arabic].
- (6) “The End of Paris’s Lights: Why Did the Sahel Countries Decide to Expel France?” *Al Jazeera*, October 1, 2023, accessed October 1, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/v74AF>. [Arabic].
- (7) Mouloud Amoura, “French Intervention in the Sahel: A Study of Dimensions and Strategies,” *Journal of Legal and Political Sciences* 1, no. 2 (September 2021): 839, <https://asjp.cerist.dz/en/article/166967>. [Arabic].
- (8) Chataignier, 128.
- (9) Although some thinkers view the legacy of language and culture as a kind of war booty, the International Organisation of La Francophonie (OIF) is undoubtedly one of the instruments that entrenches the dependency of African states and elites on France. It counts 93 member governments and states across Africa, the Atlantic and Asia; French speakers number over 321 million; French is the fourth most-used language on the internet; and nearly 144 million people worldwide either study the language or are educated using French.
- (10) One early form of resisting French influence was the adoption of the socialist model by several countries, but implementing this model also carried contradictions and complexities at various levels. In addition to natural conditions and the legacies of colonialism — such as high rates of underdevelopment, the spread of disease and the absence of infrastructure — there was a shortage of national cadres needed to run the state and confront complex crises.
- (11) “Mali,” *Direction générale du Trésor, Ministère de l’Économie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique*, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr/Pays/ML>. [French].
- (12) “Direction de la Diplomatie Économique, Mali,” *economie.gouv.fr*, April 2024, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/23jzokfk>. [French].
- (13) Mariam Ali Abdelhay Farag, “The Future of France’s Role in Africa,” *Global Views*, no. 40 (August 2025), <https://tinyurl.com/2c77rgyh>. [Arabic].
- (14) “Direction Générale du Trésor, TCHAD,” *economie.gouv.fr*, August 4, 2023, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/28b89dvx>. [French].
- (15) “Direction de la Diplomatie Économique, Niger,” *economie.gouv.fr*, April 2024, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/26aa7dsd>. [French].
- (16) “Direction Générale du Trésor, Niger,” *economie.gouv.fr*, August 1, 2025, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/2xt6p93f>. [French].
- (17) “Ministère de l’Economie et des Finances, Niger,” *France Diplomatie*, September 16, 2025, accessed October 13, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/295n3fn9>. [French].
- (18) In the same vein, France’s imports of Algerian gas have contracted sharply after Italy secured the largest share of Algeria’s gas exports — this followed a turn in French diplomacy toward escalation with Algeria under right-wing pressure in France and against the backdrop of France’s recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, which Algeria views as a provocation. Algeria responded by reducing its imports of French wheat, fruit and various equipment. Algeria imports between 2 million and 6 million tons of French wheat each year, making it one of France’s biggest customers; however, imported quantities have fallen markedly in recent years, to about 1.8 million tons in the 2021–2022 and 2022–2023 seasons and then to 1.6 million tons in the 2023–2024 season. For more details, see: “Algérie, Les Importations Françaises en Chute Libre” (Algeria: French Imports in Free Fall), *Echorouk Online*, February 12, 2025, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/23ndx5ml>. [French].

- (19) The Yellow Vest movement was a manifestation of popular protests that France experienced in November 2018 over a bill put forward by the French president to raise the age and years of work required to qualify for a pension, which angered broad segments of French society and drove them into weeks of large-scale demonstrations wearing yellow vests like those used by workshop and factory workers. This compelled the government to resort to forms of physical force, violence, arrests and legal prosecutions after clashes with police intensified in Paris and other major French cities, resulting in injuries on both sides. For more details, see: Alain Joxe, "Les Gilets Jaunes, un Mouvement Social Inédit" (The Yellow Vests, an Unprecedented Social Movement), *Hérodote*, no. 117 (April 2019), accessed September 10, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/28ph3oet>. [French].
- Ludivine Bantigny et al., "Les Gilets jaunes une histoire de classe?" *Mouvements*, no. 100 (April 2019): 12-23, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-mouvements-2019-4?lang=fr>. [Arabic].
- (20) Al-Mahdi al-Zaydaoui, "Has France Ended the Macron Era?" *Al Jazeera*, September 10, 2025, accessed October 2, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/NJGWY>. [Arabic].
- (21) Xavier Le Roux, "La chute du gouvernement Michel Barnier" (The Fall of the Michel Barnier Government), *La Nouvelle République*, December 5, 2024, accessed September 10, 2025, <https://tinyurl.com/24vcwscw>. [French].
- (22) "The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)," *Al Jazeera.net*, January 29, 2024, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/t6Rhq>. [Arabic].
- (23) "France Backs ECOWAS Intervention as the Deadline Nears and the Military in Niamey Threaten Without Budgeting," *Euronews*, August 6, 2024, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/Cobw5>. [Arabic].
- (24) Osama al-Saeed, "ECOWAS Bleeding: A New Blow to France's Influence in West Africa," *Asharq Al Awsat*, February 2, 2024, accessed September 30, 2025, <https://shorturl.at/MrOK9>. [Arabic].
- (25) Giuseppe Gagliano, "GÉOPOLITIQUE – Les origines de la Pensée Géopolitique et la Contribution de Mackinder" (Geopolitics: The Origins of Geopolitical Thought and Mackinder's Contribution), *Le Diplomate Media*, February 5, 2025, <https://lediplomate.media/2025/02/origines-pensee-geopolitique-mackinder/giuseppe-gagliano/monde/europe/>. [French].





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