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# IRAN'S NEO-PERSIAN STRATEGY BETWEEN SETBACKS AND PERSISTENCE

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## Abstract

Iran's neo-Persian policy emphasizes the country's traditional Persian identity and aspires to restore Iran as both a regional and international power. This strategy seeks to expand Iran's sphere of influence beyond its borders by invoking the historical legacy of the Persian Empire. Through a combination of diplomatic, military and economic tools, Iran pursues the consolidation of its regional power and its projection as a global actor in international politics. Neo-Persian policy balances Shiism — the ideological foundation of the Iranian republic — with the historical continuity of Persian identity. While Shiism serves as a central instrument of this project, Iran also leverages the Palestinian cause and anti-imperialist discourse to broaden its appeal to Sunni states, thereby mobilizing support among diverse Islamic movements. This paper analyzes neo-Persian policy as a hybrid strategy of identity and power projection and assesses its implications for regional and global geopolitics.

**Keywords:** Neo-Persian Strategy, Shiite Crescent, Proxy Warfare, Middle East Geopolitics, Regional Security

## Introduction

Iran's policy of reviving the legacy of the Persian Empire and extending its dominion in the region can be traced back to the Safavid era. This policy resulted in at least 11 wars — both major and minor — between the Ottoman Empire and Iran from 1514 to 1823. The strategy of embracing and glorifying Persian imperial heritage was later institutionalized as a state policy during the Pahlavi dynasty in the 20th century. At the height of Persian nationalism, the monarchy celebrated the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian dynasty at Persepolis in 1971.

The ambition to revive the legacy of the Persian dynasty persisted even after the 1979 revolution. The theocratic establishment in Iran pursued this aspiration through policies centered on exporting the revolution and promoting the concept of the “Shiite Crescent,” with the aim of expanding into territories that once fell under the control of the Persian Empire.

Articles 150 and 151 of the Iranian Constitution, ratified by popular referendum in 1979, confer upon the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) an explicitly ideological mandate: “jihad in the way of God; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world.” In this respect, the IRGC is entrusted not only with the defense of Iran's territorial borders but also with advancing an ideological mission beyond them, in line with the broader objectives of the Iranian republic. The Qur'anic verse incorporated into Article 151 from Surah al-Anfal — “Muster against them all the men and cavalry at your command, so that you may strike terror into the enemy of God and your enemy and others beside them who are unknown to you but known to God” — has been interpreted by Shiite scholars as imposing upon the armed forces a religious obligation to engage in jihad in God's path.<sup>(1)</sup>

Iran does not limit its organizational and ideological activities to countries with a Shiite Muslim majority; it also actively engages in states where Sunnis constitute the majority population. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Iranian republic, articulated the leadership's commitment to exporting the revolution as follows, “We should try to export our revolution to the world. We should set aside the thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard the various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the oppressed peoples of the world. On the other hand, all the superpowers and the [great] powers have risen to destroy us. If we remain in an enclosed environment we shall definitely face defeat.”<sup>(2)</sup>

Through sectarian policies and by utilizing Shiism as a strategic instrument, Iran has encountered relatively few obstacles in securing political influence across many neighboring states. Despite challenges, the Iranian leadership has consistently continued its expansionist pursuits toward territories once conquered 2,500 years ago by the armies of the Persian kings Cyrus and Xerxes.

Iran's “Shiite Crescent” project cannot be separated from its broader neo-Persian policies. The US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the subsequent developments following the Arab Spring provided Iran with significant opportunities to

advance its neo-Persian agenda. During the eight-year Iran–Iraq War, Iran failed to secure any territorial gains; yet in later years, capitals such as Baghdad and Damascus increasingly fell under Iran’s sphere of influence.

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria on December 8, 2024, and the 12-Day War between Israel and Iran that erupted on June 13, 2025, dealt a major blow to Iran’s neo-Persian strategy. Nevertheless, Iran appears determined to persist in pursuing this trajectory despite these significant setbacks.

### **Neo-Persian Policy — Historical Background**

By the sixth century BCE, the Achaemenids had built the largest empire of the ancient world, extending from the Indus to the Mediterranean. Under Cyrus and Cambyses, Persia developed an imperial vision that emphasized maritime access, conquest and integration of diverse peoples.<sup>(3)</sup> Cyrus’ capture of Babylon in 539 BCE symbolized this universal authority, later celebrated by Xenophon in the *Cyropaedia*.<sup>(4)</sup>

Darius I (522–486 BCE) expanded this vision into a doctrine of universal sovereignty, legitimized by Ahuramazda. Inscriptions depict him as “King of Kings” ruling from Sogdiana to Ethiopia, a dominion framed as divinely ordained.<sup>(5)</sup> This imperial ideal produced the “Pax Persia,” an integrative system in which local elites were incorporated into Persian governance, fostering stability across vast territories.<sup>(6)</sup>

Though the empire later fell to Alexander the Great, its legacy endured through the Parthians (247 BCE–224 CE) and Sasanians (224–651 CE), both of which revived Achaemenid notions of power and rivalry with Rome.<sup>(7)</sup> Persian identity persisted even under conquest, shaping subsequent dynasties.

The Safavids (1501–1736) institutionalized Shiism as the state religion, forging a lasting sectarian identity in Iran.<sup>(8)</sup> Their westward ambitions brought them into sustained conflict with the Ottomans, beginning with Chaldiran in 1514 and culminating in the Treaty of Zuhab (1639), which fixed borders still largely intact today.<sup>(9)</sup> The rivalry centered on the Caucasus, Kurdistan, Baghdad and Basra. Continuous conflict forced the Safavids to shift their capitals from Tabriz to Qazvin and finally to Isfahan.<sup>(10)</sup>

In these wars, the Ottomans allied with Kurdish principalities, while the Safavids deported Kurds, Armenians and Georgians to secure frontier regions — most notably relocating 40,000 Chamishkazaklu Kurds to Khorasan under Shah Abbas.<sup>(11)</sup>

Thus, from the Achaemenids to the Safavids, Persian political thought combined imperial universalism, religious legitimation and recurrent rivalry with neighboring empires, shaping the deep historical roots of Iran’s neo-Persian policy.

### **The Pahlavi Dynasty’s Longing for the Persian Empire**

From the very beginning of its rule in Iran, the Pahlavi dynasty’s leading intellectuals consistently invoked the grandeur of the country’s pre-Islamic past. As

early as the 19th century, during the weakened Qajar period, Pahlavism had already constructed an official mythology that glorified Iran's pre-Islamic era. At its core, this official mythology represented a powerful form of nationalism that emphasized the splendor of Iran in the fifth century BCE.

This nationalist wave reached its peak in 1971, when the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian monarchy was celebrated at Persepolis. With the accession of Reza Shah to the throne in 1925, Islamic ideology was sidelined in favor of reviving the legacy of the ancient Persian dynasties.<sup>(12)</sup> Envisioning a return to ancient Persian grandeur, the shah decreed the abandonment of the Islamic Hijri calendar and promoted Iran's Aryan identity. He believed that an Iran embracing its Aryan heritage would be more closely aligned as a strategic ally with the West.<sup>(13)</sup>

From a nationalist perspective, the emphasis on Iran's Aryan civilization and the imposition of Persian as the compulsory language of instruction for the diverse peoples and communities within Iran served one central purpose: the expansion of Iranian influence and the acquisition of new territories. In 1929, when King Amanullah of Afghanistan was deposed amid the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, Iran immediately sought to exploit Afghanistan's weakened condition. Abdolhossein Teymourtash, the shah's minister of court — who emerged as the chief architect of Iran's secular and nationalist policies — mobilized the army to the Afghan border in an attempt to annex the province of Herat. Iran retreated only after the intervention of the Soviet Union and Turkey. During the same period, Iran also laid claim to Bahrain and several other territories in the Gulf region, arguing that the populations there were of Persian origin despite their Arab identity.<sup>(14)</sup>

During the 1970s, petroleum exported to nearly all industrialized Western countries not governed by communist regimes was supplied predominantly by Gulf states such as Oman, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq and Iran. The massive oil tankers transporting this petroleum passed through the Strait of Hormuz, traversed the Gulf of Oman and entered the Indian Ocean.

By 1978, Iran was the second-largest oil producer among OPEC members. The oil revenues of the 1960s and 1970s elevated Iran to a second-tier power in international politics, enabling the country to assume the role of "policeman" in the Gulf region. Driven by nationalist and expansionist ambitions, the shah of Iran, on November 30, 1971, occupied three small but strategically vital islands at the mouth of the Gulf — Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. His broader objective was to exert influence over all the Gulf states along the littoral, from Oman to Kuwait. Each time the UAE raises its claims over the islands, it is met with a strong reaction from Iran. Tehran continues to reject the prospect of submitting the dispute to the International Court of Justice.<sup>(15)</sup> Iran's largest military operation in 1971 was its intervention in Oman's Dhofar region, where Iranian troops were deployed to assist the sultan of Oman in suppressing an armed rebellion.<sup>(16)</sup>

With Britain's withdrawal from the region, Iran — supported by Western powers — moved to fill the power vacuum in the Gulf. As the Gulf states grew

wealthier, their military expenditures also increased to counter Iran's expansionism. By 1974, US arms sales to the Gulf states had reached \$4.4 billion, with Iran and Saudi Arabia being the largest purchasers.<sup>(17)</sup> However, the 1979 revolution brought an end to Iran's role as the policeman of the Gulf.<sup>(18)</sup>

The Iranian revolution is regarded as one of the most significant events of the 20th century.<sup>(19)</sup> It radically transformed Iran's foreign policy from a pro-Western orientation to an anti-Western, revolutionary stance led by clerics.<sup>(20)</sup>

A referendum in March 1979 established the "Islamic Republic" with 98.2% support, followed by the drafting of a new constitution that granted Ayatollah Khomeini absolute religious and political authority.<sup>(21)</sup> The Constitution also mandated "exporting the revolution," leading Iran to promote Islamist movements across Shiite and Sunni contexts.<sup>(22)</sup> Khomeini emphasized that the revolution must extend globally, "We should try to export our revolution to the world... Islam does not regard the various Islamic countries differently."<sup>(23)</sup> After the 1987 Mecca incident, he declared, "We will export our experiences to the world... implementation of Islamic teaching among enslaved nations."<sup>(24)</sup>

This expansionist vision contributed to the Iran–Iraq War and shaped the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, a term once associated with American Protestantism but later tied to revolutionary and violent Islamist movements.<sup>(25)</sup> Iran also employed extraterritorial violence: by the mid-1990s, around 350 dissidents had been assassinated abroad, and the Rushdie fatwa exemplified its transnational reach.<sup>(26)</sup> In sum, the Iranian revolution transformed Islamic movements at both regional and global levels.

### **Regional Movements in Light of Neo-Persianism**

Iran's sense of strategic solitude — surrounded by Arabs, Turks and Kurds — has nourished both anxiety and ambition. This pattern dates back to the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), when Persian rulers consolidated Shiism and carved out a distinct political and cultural space between the Ottoman and Mughal empires. Since then, Iran's identity has rested on two inseparable pillars: the Persian language and Shiism.<sup>(27)</sup> Persian nationalism, with roots extending 2,500 years, has reinforced this dual identity.<sup>(28)</sup>

On December 8, 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah, in an interview with *The Washington Post*, became the first leader to publicly highlight the reality of a "Shiite Crescent" in the Middle East. He warned, "If pro-Iran parties or politicians dominate the new Iraqi government, a new 'crescent' of dominant Shiite movements or governments stretching from Iran into Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon could emerge, alter the traditional balance of power between the two main Islamic sects, and pose new challenges to U.S. interests and allies."<sup>(29)</sup>

King Abdullah's foresight was validated when Iraq's first elections on January 30, 2005 resulted in the victory of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which secured 48% of the vote with a remarkably high turnout — even in Sunni-majority Tikrit, where participation reached 83%.<sup>(30)</sup> The Shiite coalition, composed largely of the

Islamic Da'wa Party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq and Muqtada al-Sadr's movement, came to power. Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, a Da'wa Party leader with close ties to Iran, became prime minister, succeeded in 2006 by Nouri al-Maliki, since then Shiite factions have held power in Iraq.

As is widely recognized, Iran's engagement with Shiite populations beyond its borders began immediately after the 1979 revolution. In Arab countries, Iran regarded Shiite communities as a potential "Fifth Column"—Iran's support base and influence within other states.<sup>(31)</sup> Echoing this concern, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak stated in a 2006 interview with Al Arabiya TV, "There is a significant Shiite population in all the countries of the region, and these Shiites are usually more loyal to Iran than to the countries in which they live."<sup>(32)</sup> As Jeffrey Mankoff pointed out, Iran has consistently regarded Shiite populations beyond its borders as instruments of political leverage.<sup>(33)</sup>

Since 1979, Shiism has served as a theo-political instrument for Iran's regional ambitions. From Lebanon to Pakistan, nearly all radical Shiite groups have fought on Iran's behalf. Despite Sunni jihadist groups such as al-Qaeda or ISIS, viewing Saudi Arabia as an adversary, Iran cultivated pragmatic ties with some of them. Leveraging its anti-American and anti-Israeli stance, Tehran established relationships with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), granting it broader maneuverability in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>(34)</sup>

Iran's relations with Hamas began in the early 1990s and deepened after the Oslo Peace Accords, which created a rift between Iran and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). In 1994, Iranian students besieged the PLO office in Tehran to protest the organization's rapprochement with Israel.<sup>(35)</sup> After Hamas seized Gaza in 2007, Iranian support reportedly reached \$250 million annually.<sup>(36)</sup> Following the October 7, 2023 attacks, Iran was widely believed to be financing most of Hamas's military operations, while al-Qaeda leader Saif al-Adel is said to have resided in Iran for much of the last two decades.<sup>(37)</sup>

According to the Congressional Research Service, Iran's regional objectives are threefold: to diminish US influence, to protect Shiite populations and strengthen its regional presence.<sup>(38)</sup> To achieve this, the post-revolutionary leadership employed propaganda, cultural diplomacy and military proxies. Yet Iran's ambitions were never confined to Shiite-majority states. As Ahmad Khomeini declared in 1991, "Islam recognizes no borders... The objective of the Islamic Republic... is none other than to establish a global Islamic rule."<sup>(39)</sup> During his 1991 visit to Sudan, President Hashemi Rafsanjani echoed this vision, describing Iran and Sudan's revolutions as "sources of movement throughout the Islamic world."<sup>(40)</sup>

Iran's regional influence also intersects with the geopolitics of energy. A considerable share of the Middle East's oil and gas reserves — including those in Saudi Arabia — is situated in areas with substantial Shiite populations.<sup>(41)</sup> Prior to the revolution, Iran had maintained close ties with Israel, while relations with Syria were limited. After 1979, however, Tehran's anti-Israel stance brought

Tehran and Damascus closer together. President Hafez al-Assad welcomed the revolution as a victory for Arabs and Muslims against Zionism.<sup>(42)</sup> By contrast, pro-Western Arab states viewed the revolution with suspicion, especially after Iran cancelled its agreements with Washington and Tel Aviv, Iran started to threaten Arab states.<sup>(43)</sup>

Despite ideological differences, Iran set aside pan-Islamist rhetoric to support Assad's secular regime. During the 1982 Hama massacre, Tehran openly sided with Damascus against the Muslim Brotherhood. Soon after, the two states signed a 10-year economic agreement, while Syria shut down Iraq's oil pipeline to the Mediterranean, dealing Baghdad a severe economic blow.<sup>(44)</sup>

That same year, Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon further consolidated the alliance. Iran deployed IRGC troops through Syria and helped establish Hezbollah, which became a key instrument of Tehran's neo-Persian policies.<sup>(45)</sup> Hezbollah, trained and armed by Iran, carried out the 1983 Beirut bombings that killed over 300 US and French soldiers.<sup>(46)</sup> The Quds Force played a central role in such operations, earning a reputation as "the most organized, disciplined, and violent terrorist organization in the world."<sup>(47)</sup>

Although Syria occasionally feared excessive Iranian influence — especially after the Taif Agreement of 1989 and the Oslo Accords of 1993 — the partnership endured. Disputes over the UAE islands and Israel's "land for peace" policy caused friction, yet the alliance survived due to their shared anti-Israel and anti-US orientation.<sup>(48)</sup>

### **US Challenging Iran's Expansionist Project in the Middle East**

The greatest obstacle to Iran's neo-Persian policy in the Middle East was the United States. Immediately after the revolution, while Iran planned to expand toward the Gulf states, it was confronted by the United States' presence, which allied with the Gulf states. As early as 1999, Samuel Huntington wrote that Iran was a rising regional power poised to challenge "American superpowerdom" in the Middle East.<sup>(49)</sup> Indeed, this came to pass. Following the Vietnam War of 1975, Iran would become the country responsible for inflicting the United States with the heaviest casualties.<sup>(50)</sup>

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 prompted the United States to adopt new measures for the protection of the Gulf region. In January 1980, the Carter Doctrine declared that the United States would, if necessary, intervene militarily in the Gulf. Although the doctrine was officially directed at Soviet expansionism, after the collapse of the Soviet Union it was applied almost exclusively against Iran. In his historic address President Jimmy Carter stated, "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Arabian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."<sup>(51)</sup>

During Carter's presidency, the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force was established to intervene in case of regional instability.<sup>(52)</sup> Under the Reagan administration, however, this project was abandoned in favor of CENTCOM, a permanent force operating in the Indian Ocean.<sup>(53)</sup>

As the United States expanded its influence in the Middle East, Iran's rhetoric toward Washington grew increasingly harsher. Khomeini believed that Iraq had attacked Iran at the instigation of the United States and regarded Saddam Hussein as a US proxy. According to Khomeini, Iraq was fighting Iran on Washington's behalf.<sup>(54)</sup>

In the broader US–Iran confrontation, Tehran's interpretation of the international system has played a significant role. Iran perceives the US-led global order as fundamentally unjust and believes it must be replaced with a fairer and more equitable system. From Tehran's perspective, this order is structurally divided into two opposing worlds: the world of good and the world of evil — light versus darkness. Within this binary worldview, one side represents the “Party of God” (Hezbollah) and the other the “Great Satan” (Shay ān-e Bozorg). Reconciliation between the two is seen as impossible.<sup>(55)</sup> While Iran identifies the United States as the “Great Satan,” it refers to Israel, which it perceives as Washington's regional extension, as the “Lesser Satan.”<sup>(56)</sup>

Iran views confrontation with the United States as a requirement of its national interest. In 2001, Ayatollah Mahmood Hashemi Shahroudi, then chief of the judiciary, declared, “Our national interests lie with antagonizing the Great Satan. We condemn any cowardly stance toward America and any word on compromise with the Great Satan.”<sup>(57)</sup>

In practice, however, the United States pursued a balanced strategy during the Iran–Iraq War, seeking to prevent both the Soviet Union and Iran from establishing dominance over the Gulf region. To this end, covert US initiatives led by the CIA and the National Security Council (NSC) facilitated limited arms sales to Tehran. These weapons were not sufficient to decisively alter the conflict in Iran's favor, but they were significant in demonstrating to Tehran that it need not rely solely on Moscow for military supplies.<sup>(58)</sup>

Before the revolution, President Carter had famously described Iran as an “island of stability.”<sup>(59)</sup> After 1979, however, Iran transformed into what was, from Washington's perspective, an “island of instability.” In addition to preventing Iran from falling under Soviet influence, the United States also sought to ensure that Iran would neither export its revolution to neighboring states nor destabilize the Gulf region and disrupt the flow of oil. During the Reagan administration, Washington pursued a dual containment strategy toward Iran under the framework of its “northern” and “southern concerns.” While the northern concern aimed to keep Iran insulated from Soviet influence, the southern concern was directed at preventing Tehran from threatening allies in the Gulf and exporting its revolutionary ideology.<sup>(60)</sup>

Paradoxically, the revolutionary leadership's slogan of "Neither East nor West" ultimately served the logic of the United States' northern concern, as it limited Iran's alignment with Moscow. US Secretary of State Alexander Haig clarified that US neutrality in the Iran-Iraq War did not mean indifference, while in May 1982, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger explicitly underlined Washington's position, "An Iranian victory is certainly not in our national interests."<sup>(61)</sup>

In a 1983 study conducted by the National Security Council (NSC), Washington's approach to the Iran-Iraq War was articulated in the following terms, "The preservation of Iraq's territorial and political integrity is in the U.S. interest. Should Iraq collapse, the installation of a revolutionary Shi'ite regime in Baghdad would raise the potential for increased instability in the Gulf Arab states and the possibility of an Iranian-Syrian axis, which could threaten not only the Gulf region, but also Jordan, Israel, and U.S. interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Destabilization would tend to open opportunities for increased Soviet influence in the region... U.S. policy concerns currently center on the possibility that Iraq, despite moves on the part of its supporters to sustain its economic and military capacities, ultimately might collapse as a result of the war of attrition, to the detriment of American regional interests... The U.S. has an interest in preventing Iranian revolutionary military expansion in the Gulf region."<sup>(62)</sup>

The United States had already begun covertly supporting Iraq. As early as April 1981, Haig dispatched a delegation to Baghdad to initiate discussions, and arms shipments reached Iraq through third countries. The intelligence from AWACS reconnaissance systems was transferred to Iraq. Over time, US support for Iraq became increasingly explicit and direct. In February 1982, Iraq was removed from the list of states sponsoring terrorism, paving the way for agricultural agreements in which US products were supplied to Iraq on credit. Under the Reagan administration, approval was granted in 1983 for the sale of 60 helicopters to Iraq. By 1984, full diplomatic relations between Washington and Baghdad were restored, followed by cooperation in agriculture, industry, energy and telecommunications. During the same period, Western European states also refrained from opposing arms sales to Iraq. Moreover, the Reagan administration encouraged the Gulf states to deepen their economic and financial ties with Baghdad.<sup>(63)</sup>

As the United States drew closer to Iraq, attacks by Iran and Iran-backed groups against US targets intensified. In late September 1984, a bombing at the US embassy in Beirut killed 24 people, including two Americans. The following month, a Kuwait Airways flight bound for Pakistan was hijacked, and its passengers were taken hostage before the plane was forced to land in Tehran. Onboard, two US officials from the US Agency for International Development were executed. Six days later, Iranian security forces stormed the plane, captured the hijackers — linked to Hezbollah — but released them without trial. In response to the increasing attacks on US interests, Reagan declared, "The United States gives terrorists no reward and no guarantees. We make no concessions; we make no deals. Nations that harbor terrorists undermine their own stability and endanger their

own people. Terrorists, be on notice, we will fight back against you in Lebanon and elsewhere. We will fight back against your cowardly attacks on American citizens and property.”<sup>(64)</sup>

Al-Qaeda’s attacks against the United States in September 2001 temporarily shifted Washington’s focus away from Iran. Tehran assumed that from then on, the United States would perceive Sunni extremism rather than Shiite theocracy as the greater threat. Following the 9/11 attacks, there was a brief rapprochement between Iran and the United States: US diplomat Ryan Crocker met in Geneva with an envoy of General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the IRGC’s Quds Force. After the meeting, Iran provided Crocker with detailed maps indicating Taliban positions and supported the US military campaign against the Taliban by opening its airspace.<sup>(65)</sup>

From the late 1980s to the early 2010s, Iran’s relations with the United States oscillated between confrontation and limited engagement. The end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1988, combined with Tehran’s pursuit of nuclear technology, increasingly brought it into conflict with Washington and its allies. During the 1990s, US administrations intensified sanctions, while in the 2000s Iran’s nuclear advances triggered global concern. The signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 briefly opened the door to diplomacy, yet the US withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 restored an atmosphere of mistrust. These developments set the stage for the escalation that would ultimately culminate in direct confrontation between Israel and Iran after 2023.

### **The 2025-2026 Wars and the Rupture in Neo-Persian Policy**

Tehran’s use of proxy actors to become adjacent to Israeli borders reflects its broader strategy of Mediterranean access within the framework of regional power projection and neo-Persian geopolitics. By gaining strategic depth along the Iraq-Syria-Lebanon axis (the Shiite Crescent) through sectarian identity politics, Iran has bolstered its standing in the Eastern Mediterranean for nearly three decades by leveraging the Palestinian cause as a foreign policy instrument. While Iran maintained the conflict on an asymmetric level via proxies until October 7, 2023, it has since shifted its rivalry with Israel toward a direct and conventional confrontational footing.

Escalating direct clashes between Iran and Israel throughout 2024 witnessed mutual retaliations targeting each other’s strategic deterrence capacities. Responding to Iran’s April 13, 2024 attack on Nevatim Airbase, Israel targeted air defense systems securing nuclear facilities in Isfahan and Natanz, thereby exposing Tehran’s defensive vulnerabilities.<sup>(66)</sup> Following renewed ballistic missile strikes in October 2024, Israel expanded its operational scope, systematically targeting not only air defense radars but also critical facilities vital to Iran’s missile production capacity.<sup>(67)</sup>

On April 12, 2025, Trump’s diplomatic ultimatum to Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei set a 60-day deadline for the resumption of nuclear negotiations.

Following the expiration of this grace period without a consensus, Israel launched a comprehensive military operation against Iran on June 13, 2025. Having lost its strategic depth due to the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah's loss of operational capability, and the breaking of Hamas' resistance in Gaza, Tehran was left vulnerable to the assault. The intervention of the United States on the 11th day of the war, through aerial operations targeting nuclear facilities, accelerated the process; the conflict concluded with a ceasefire declared on the 12th day.<sup>(68)</sup>

In my July 16, 2025 article for EISMENA, titled "The War Iran Brought Home," I maintained that, "If the aim of the United States and Israel is to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, they must be prepared to launch further strikes, because the Iranian regime will not relinquish its nuclear ambitions. In short, the U.S. and Israel face only two options: either accept a nuclear-armed Iran or, as in the case of Iraq, be compelled to launch a second Gulf War to topple a regime they failed to overthrow during the first. There is no third alternative."<sup>(69)</sup>

Less than eight months after the publication of my July 16 article in EISMENA, the simultaneous military operations launched by the United States and Israel against Iran on February 28, 2026, elevated regional tensions to a new dimension. In response to these strikes, the Tehran administration conducted comprehensive retaliatory actions across nine distinct locations. These targets included Israel and Jordan, as well as countries hosting US military bases, namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq.

On December 28, 2025, protests that erupted in Tehran's Grand Bazaar (Bazar-e Bozorg) quickly spread to strategic hubs such as Mashhad, Isfahan, Shiraz, Karaj and Hamadan, evolving into the most comprehensive social movement in recent years. The state's attempt to suppress the demonstrations through harsh military intervention drew international condemnation. In this context, the United States announced on January 2, 2026, that the military intervention option remained "on the table" should violence against peaceful protesters persist. By January 12, 2026, economic pressure intensified as the United States declared additional customs tariffs on countries maintaining trade relations with Iran. According to Guardian newspaper reports dated January 27, 2026, while the government officially confirmed 3,000 casualties, independent human rights organizations estimate that the actual death toll has exceeded 33,000.<sup>(70)</sup>

Internal unrest in Iran and the state's brutal crackdowns paved the way for an earlier, than anticipated start to foreign military intervention. The strategic calculations of the United States and Israel, suggesting that an operation synchronized with domestic uprisings could trigger regime change, materialized with the targeting of Khamenei on the first day of the campaign. On the 39th day of the war, a 15-day temporary ceasefire brokered by Pakistan brought the parties to the negotiating table for the first time in 47 years. However, 21 hours of intensive talks in Islamabad resulted in failure due to the incompatibility of the peace terms proposed by the sides. Following the deadlock in negotiations, Iran announced the

total closure of the Strait of Hormuz to all maritime traffic on April 12, 2026, while the United States initiated a comprehensive naval blockade against Iranian ports on April 13, 2026.

The 15-point plan presented by the United States mandates the complete cessation of nuclear activities and the closure of facilities, the restriction of the ballistic missile program, the transfer of 60% enriched uranium to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the opening of the Strait of Hormuz to international traffic. In response, Iran's 10-point counter-proposal demands compensation for war damages, international guarantees against future attacks, the protection of its nuclear energy rights and the establishment of a new navigation protocol that includes charging fees for vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz. These conditions set forth by both parties are highly maximalist in nature, making a compromise extremely difficult within the current political conjuncture. Iran is unwilling to relinquish two key assets it deems vital: its nuclear energy program and its leverage over the Strait of Hormuz. In fact, both of these assets serve as the most significant instruments of neo-Persian policy.

When examined from a historical perspective, it is observed that Iran's nuclear program and regional expansion strategy derive their fundamental basis from the neo-Persian foundations laid during the Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi era. Although the nuclear initiatives and strategic partnerships established with the West, originally launched as part of Mohammad Reza Shah's "Great Civilization" vision, underwent an ideological transformation in the post-revolutionary period, the geopolitical objective has remained the same: regional leadership and invulnerability.

The 2026 war represents the most severe phase of conflict that this long-term strategy has entered with the international system. By virtue of its nuclear capacity and the asymmetric depth it has constructed through proxy forces, Iran proves that it will not relinquish its regional claims despite the military and economic pressures it faces. Consequently, Iran's nuclear program is not merely a technical energy issue, but a national survival doctrine rooted in ancient Persian grandeur and blended with modern geopolitical requirements.

Iran's attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz directly conflicts with the "transit passage regime" regulated by the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The waters of the strait, which are open to international navigation, cannot be closed to commercial traffic through the unilateral discretion of the coastal state.<sup>(71)</sup>

Regardless of the nature of any agreement reached between the United States and Iran, as long as the Iranian political system persists, Kurds, Balochs, Azeris, Arabs and other ethnic/religious minorities will continue to be deprived of their fundamental rights and freedoms domestically. Internationally, the ruling establishment will continue to pose a security threat to the entire region, particularly to the Gulf countries and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq.

Despite Iran's longstanding sectarian provocations, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman extended an olive branch to Iran several years ago and signed an agreement in Beijing on March 10, 2023 for the restoration of diplomatic relations. Nevertheless, on March 2, 2026, Iran targeted Ras Tanura, Saudi Arabia's largest oil processing facility, with unmanned aerial vehicles, resulting in the total cessation of all operations at the facility following the attack.

In his speech at the European Parliament on April 16, 2026, Mustafa Hijri, the secretary-general of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, stated, "The Iranian regime cannot be reformed. The Iranian government is a threat not only to Iranians but to the entire world. The international community must not allow the establishment of another chauvinistic and centralized state under a new name in Iran. The path forward is a democratic, federal, and secular Iran."

Undoubtedly, opposition figures such as Hijri, who has been involved in the dissident struggle for decades, know the Iranian power elite much more intimately. The Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan was founded in 1945 and exercised control over a large portion of Iranian Kurdistan between 1979 and 1983. At the current juncture, it is clearly observed that as long as the Iranian political order persists, it will not relinquish its nuclear program; instead, it will continue to destabilize global energy markets by utilizing the Strait of Hormuz as leverage and persist in implementing its neo-Persian policies.

### **Neo-Persian Strategy and the Question of Continuity**

Reza Shah (1925–1941), the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty, consolidated his political influence through the military coup of 1921 and was proclaimed "Shah" by the Parliament following the abolition of the Qajar dynasty in 1925. With the reign of Reza Shah, the ideological axis of the state was purged of Islamic references and reconstructed upon the objective of revitalizing Persian heritage, which finds its roots in the pre-Islamic era.

Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941–1979), who ascended the throne following his father's exile in 1941, implemented comprehensive modernization programs known as the "White Revolution," while simultaneously adopting a potent nationalist doctrine that referenced Iran's fifth-century B.C.E. splendor. In accordance with his vision to restore ancient Persian glory, the shah modernized this historical legacy through the "2,500th Anniversary of the Monarchy" celebrations held at Persepolis in 1971, seeking to progressively integrate Iranian society into an expansionist neo-Persian policy.

Khomeini, who rose to power following the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime in 1979, advocated the doctrine of "exporting the Islamic Revolution" from the early years of his administration. During this period, the Tehran government established as its primary foreign policy principle the termination of the existence of Israel, which it characterized as the "Little Satan," and the complete eradication of the influence of the United States, defined as the "Great Satan," in the Middle East. Following the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, Iran turned toward an

expansionist strategy, also referred to in the literature as “neo-Persian policy,” in order to enhance its regional efficacy. Accordingly, Tehran established an asymmetric sphere of influence through paramilitary groups and proxy forces loyal to it in countries such as Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Yemen, making regional proxy wars an essential element of its foreign policy.

Iran’s construction of militia structures parallel to national armies in regional countries such as Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq has, over time, undermined the sovereign capacity of these states from within and led to their regression into “failed state” status. Through a deliberate strategy, the Tehran administration has materialized its neo-Persian policies by establishing political and military tutelage over these fragile geographies. A similar strategy of creating a parallel army is being applied in the specific case of Palestine through Hamas. In the context of Iraq, Iran has systematically prevented the Peshmerga forces affiliated with the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) within the Kurdistan Regional Government, from unifying under a single national army for nearly 30 years, despite diplomatic efforts by the United States. This situation demonstrates that Iran’s neo-Persian doctrine is fundamentally based on a “divide and rule” strategy, which aims to govern target geographies by keeping them fragmented.

Neo-Persian policy, which Iran has systematically implemented for many years, has suffered a significant strategic setback following the recent period of conflict with the United States and Israel. Within the perspective of the last two decades, Tehran had gained a substantial geopolitical advantage in accessing the Mediterranean basin through the “Shiite Crescent” project, the most critical component of this policy. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq in 2003 removed the greatest geostrategic obstacle to Iran’s regional expansionism. Subsequently, the Arab Spring beginning in 2010 and the Syrian Civil War allowed Tehran to exert direct influence over the Mediterranean through the logistic and political corridor it established via Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. However, the current regional conjuncture subjects the sustainability of these gains to a severe trial

The period following the October 7, 2023 attacks has resulted in a fundamental shift in the balance of power in the Middle East to the detriment of Iran. The assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Lebanon, along with the severe blow to the organization’s operational capabilities and the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria have shaken Tehran’s regional depth. These developments have compelled Iran to undergo an asymmetric withdrawal from its line of influence, which stretches from Lebanon to the Iraqi border.

The final outcome of the military intervention initiated by the United States and Israel against Iran in February 2026 remains uncertain. The process is open to various scenarios, including a diplomatic peace agreement, a long-term ceasefire that preserves the status quo or a re-escalation of the conflict. In the event of a potential escalation, the execution of limited ground operations may come to the fore in addition to aerial operations. Although Iran’s vast geography makes a total

invasion militarily challenging, regional ground operations could be launched in areas where ethnic dynamics are sensitive, such as Kurdistan, Balochistan and Khuzestan, as well as around the Strait of Hormuz, potentially involving local elements (Kurdish, Balochi, Arab and Azeri).

If this latest war does not persist and concludes with a fragile peace, Iran will declare victory. Regardless of the extent of the destruction within Iran, as long as the political system does not fall, it will consider itself victorious and will become increasingly aggressive toward both domestic and external audiences. The loss of a significant portion of the positions Iran has gained over the last 40–45 years will not lead the ruling establishment to abandon the neo-Persian policies it has resolutely attempted to implement for years. Having focused on the Syrian and Lebanese regions for many years, Iran will henceforth shift its weight toward the Gulf region.

One of the fundamental elements testing Iran's determination in its neo-Persian policy is the strategy of proxy warfare, which became institutionalized following the revolution. Whether Tehran will abandon this method in the wake of military tensions with the United States and Israel remains a critical question. However, Iran's demand for the cessation of Israel's operations in Lebanon and Yemen within the 10-point plan presented to the United States clearly demonstrates its intention to maintain its patronage over militia forces and sustain its asymmetric activities in the region.

Iran has constructed its national security doctrine upon a "layered defense" strategy, developed in coordination with its transnational allies. The primary objective of this strategy is to intercept and halt the adversary within the external layers, specifically in regions where proxy forces are stationed, before a potential conflict reaches domestic territory. According to IRGC leaders, the fundamental reason Iran has not faced a direct attack for years is this asymmetric system of defense-in-depth; furthermore, this system has provided the strategic time and deterrence necessary for the advancement of the nuclear program. However, by its very nature, this doctrine mandates the perpetuation of regional proxy wars. In this context, it can be anticipated that Tehran will continue to support Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen, while remaining vigilant to fill any power vacuum that may arise in strategic areas such as Syria.

As long as Iran continues to base its defense strategy on a multilayered structure alongside its regional allies, it is compelled to maintain the doctrine of proxy warfare. This strategic imperative indicates that Tehran will not sever its ties with entities such as Hezbollah, will exploit potential authority vacuums in Syria and will sustain its support for the Houthi movement in Yemen. Furthermore, the endeavor to retain the initiative regarding the Palestinian issue and patronage over Shiite populations in the Arab world represent efforts to consolidate Iran's influence. So long as the current power structure is preserved, the oversight of Iraq and hegemonic calculations across the region will remain the cornerstone of its neo-Persian policy.

## **Conclusion**

The transformations Iran has undergone — from Pahlavi-era Persian nationalism to Khomeini’s doctrine of “exporting the revolution”— reveal a constant expansionist core that transcends specific political ideologies. Despite the major setbacks that have struck the “Shiite Crescent” since October 7, including the collapse of Syria as strategic depth and the painful blows inflicted on Hezbollah, the doctrine of forward defense remains an existential, non-negotiable strategic choice for Iran. Iranian influence continues to rely on exploiting political vacuums and maintaining fragile states in a condition of permanent division as a means of ensuring its enduring sway. Consequently, neither US nor Israeli military pressure is likely to compel Tehran to abandon its regional ambitions. At most, Iran may opt for temporary tactical withdrawals while awaiting a favorable opportunity to restore its influence and leverage. The experience of recent decades since the 1979 revolution has demonstrated that regime survival constitutes the supreme priority. As long as the ruling establishment remains in power, it will regard war — despite its costs — as a strategic victory. Once survival is secured, it is poised to reactivate its instruments, repair its fractured influence and advance its renewed project. Consequently, the security of the region is likely to remain defined by the enduring clash between neo-Persian ambitions — a synthesis of resurgent nationalism and entrenched religious ideology — and a regional and international reality that no longer accommodates this geopolitical impulse.

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