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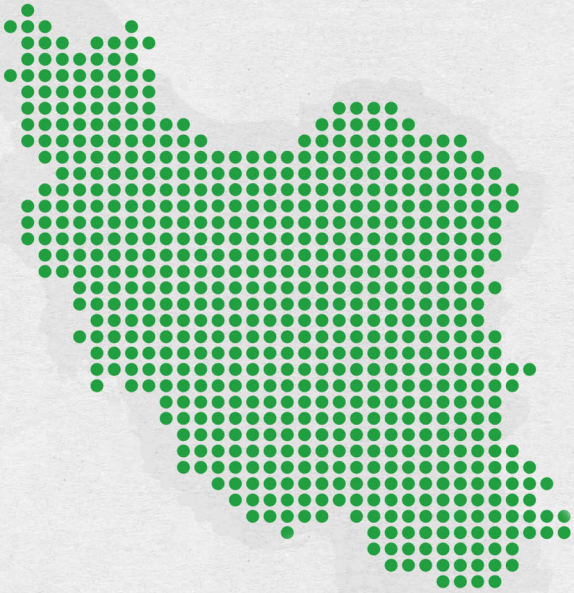
Specialized Studies

A Peer-Reviewed Biannual Periodical Journal



- The Paradox of 'Peace Through Strength' in Operation Epic Fury
- Iran and the Strait of Hormuz as a Tool of Influence in Asymmetric Warfare: Deterrence Opportunities and the Sustainability Dilemma
- Iran's Neo-Persian Strategy Between Setbacks and Persistence
- The Organizational Fragmentation of the Muslim Brotherhood and Its Position on the 12-Day War
- Examining Iran's Presence in Africa Through a Global South Lens
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Year 10, Issue 23, April 2026

23

JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

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Year 10, Issue 23, April 2026

ISSUED BY

RASANAH
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية
International Institute for Iranian Studies

JOURNAL FOR IRANIAN STUDIES

The Journal for Iranian Studies (JIS) is a peer-reviewed journal published in both English and Arabic. It is accredited by the Arab Citation and Impact Factor (ARCIF).

Rasanah: International Institute for Iranian Studies
King Fahd Road, Sahafah, Riyadh
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.
P.O. Box: 12275 | Zip code: 11473

ISSN: 1658-757X

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■ **The Paradox of 'Peace Through Strength' in Operation Epic Fury**
Naveed Ahmad 7

■ **Iran and the Strait of Hormuz as a Tool of Influence in Asymmetric Warfare: Deterrence Opportunities and the Sustainability Dilemma**
Dr. Mahmoud Hamdi Abu al-Qasim 29

■ **Iran's Neo-Persian Strategy Between Setbacks and Persistence**
Prof. Abdullah Kiran 51

■ **The Organizational Fragmentation of the Muslim Brotherhood and Its Position on the 12-Day War**
Dr. Hamad bin Sulaiman Othman al-Turki 69

■ **Examining Iran's Presence in Africa Through a Global South Lens**
Dr. Noha Nadeem 83

■ **The Water Crisis in Iran: The Problem of Sustainability and Strategic Repercussions**
Dr. Saleh Shebl Abdelmoati 95

■ **The Impact of Political Stability in Syria on Regional and International Security**
Dr. Mohammed Hassan al-Qadi 115

■ **Russia-Africa Relations: Cooperation Prospects and Partnership Challenges**
Mohammed Lamine Benaouda 137

Received	Accepted	Published
March 10, 2026	April 12, 2026	June 17, 2026

THE PARADOX OF 'PEACE THROUGH STRENGTH' IN OPERATION EPIC FURY

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Abstract

This paper examines the 2026 US/Israel-Iran conflict as a critical test of the Trump administration's national security architecture, analyzing the friction between the National Security Strategy's vision of "unprecedented peace" and the National Defense Strategy's "peace through strength" doctrine. The study examines whether the shift toward transactional realism, defined by the Department of War ethos and rigorous allied burden-sharing, effectively mitigated risks of regional entanglement. It also assesses if reliance on Israeli decapitation strikes against Iran inadvertently precipitated asymmetric retaliation, hence destabilizing the Gulf region.

Keywords: US-Israel-Iran conflict, transactional realism, game theory, balance of threat, escalation ladder, proxy warfare, asymmetric retaliation, "America First," "peace through strength," National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS).

Introduction

The 2026 US/Israel-Iran conflict represents a critically important case study for examining the architecture of US national security under President Donald Trump's 2025–2026 administration, revealing the tension between the National Security Strategy's (NSS 2025) vision of "unprecedented peace" through the empowerment of Israel, and the operational reality of the National Defense Strategy's (NDS 2026) doctrine of "peace through strength." This paper explores whether the administration's shift toward transactional realism — characterized by the Department of War's drive to impose a "peace through strength" agenda and burden-sharing with allies — succeeded in mitigating the risks of long-term regional entanglement, or whether reliance on Israeli decapitation strikes inadvertently triggered a chain of asymmetric retaliation that threatened Gulf stability and challenged the economic imperatives of the "America First" doctrine.

By interrogating the disconnect between the strategic assumption that military dominance could substitute for political stabilization and the observed volatility of the post-strike environment, this analysis applies a four-lens theoretical framework to deconstruct the failure. It utilizes game theory to reveal how the United States misread the conflict as a contest of dominance rather than a "game of chicken" and a "prisoner's dilemma" that drove rational actors toward mutual destruction. It employs Stephen Walt's balance of threat to explain the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) restraint, driven not by Iran's power but by the heightened perception of US aggressive intent. It draws on Alexander Wendt's constructivism to uncover how "warrior" identity norms and the "never leave behind" imperative locked the United States into an inescapable escalation spiral, preventing diplomatic off-ramps. Finally, it applies escalation ladder theory to demonstrate how the United States misjudged the "slippery slope" of climbing to Rung 30 (decapitation) without a viable exit strategy, turning a controlled strike into a regional conflagration.

Ultimately, this study seeks to understand whether the 2025/2026 documents represent a viable path toward sovereign stability or a high-risk gamble where the pursuit of "peace through strength" via proxy warfare and identity-driven commitment inadvertently exacerbates the very regional chaos it aims to contain, transforming a vision of strategic dominance into a precarious equilibrium of mutual vulnerability.

Contours and Paradoxes of the National Security Strategy (NSS) 2025

The NSS rejects post-Cold War "global domination" and "nation-building," framing these as failures that hollowed out the United States' industrial base and subsidized allies. It proposes a "necessary, welcome correction" focused on sovereignty, economic strength and military lethality.

"After the end of the Cold War, American foreign policy elites convinced themselves that permanent American domination of the entire world was in the best

interests of our country... They overestimated America's ability to fund . . . a massive military . . . alongside a massive welfare-regulatory-administrative state."[1]

The NSS rests on four pillars:

- "*Peace through strength:*" The United States must field the world's most powerful military to deter aggression, rejecting "idealism" for "hardnosed realism."

"President Trump's foreign policy is... pragmatic without being 'pragmatist,' realistic without being 'realist,' principled without being 'idealistic,' muscular without being 'hawkish,' and restrained without being 'dovish.' It is motivated above all by what works for America — or, in two words, 'America First.'[2] "Peace Through Strength – Strength is the best deterrent."[3]

- *Economic security & reindustrialization:* The strategy demands a return to manufacturing, energy dominance and the rejection of environmental regulations.

"We want the world's most robust industrial base... American national power depends on a strong industrial sector capable of meeting both peacetime and wartime production demands."[4] "We reject the disastrous 'climate change' and 'Net Zero' ideologies that have so greatly harmed Europe, threaten the United States, and subsidize our adversaries."[5]

- *Burden-sharing and fairness:* Allies must pay for their own defense (targeting 5% of GDP for NATO) and trade must be reciprocal. The NSS indicates that the United States will no longer tolerate "free-riding."

"We expect our allies to spend far more of their national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on their own defense... We will no longer tolerate... free-riding, trade imbalances, predatory economic practices."[6]

- *Sovereignty and border security:* The United States asserts full control over its borders and rejects transnational institutions that erode sovereignty. "The era of mass migration is over... Border security is the primary element of national security."[7]

Regional Priorities

- *The Middle East:* The NSS declared the region no longer the top priority due to US energy independence after the Shale Revolution. Iran is claimed to have been "greatly weakened" by Operation Midnight Hammer.

"The days in which the Middle East dominated American foreign policy... are thankfully over... Iran... has been greatly weakened by... Operation Midnight Hammer."[8]

- *Indo-Pacific:* It is reiterated as the primary theater for great power competition with China.
- "The Indo-Pacific is already the source of almost half the world's GDP... To thrive at home, we must successfully compete there."[9]
- *Western Hemisphere:* A "Trump Corollary" to the Monroe Doctrine to exclude foreign rivals (China/Russia) and control migration. The extraction

operation of President Nicolás Maduro from Venezuela is a manifestation of the (Donroe) doctrine.[10]

"The United States will reassert and enforce the Monroe Doctrine… This 'Trump Corollary'… is a common-sense and potent restoration of American power."[11]

Unprecedented Peace

The NSS (2025) asserts that Trump has achieved "unprecedented peace" in eight conflicts, including a deal with Iran, through "presidential diplomacy."

"President Trump has cemented his legacy as The President of Peace… [he] secured unprecedented peace in eight conflicts… including… Israel and Iran."[12]

Overall, the NSS presents a transactional worldview: The United States will protect its interests with overwhelming strength, demand allies pay their share and use diplomacy to secure "peace" through decisive force (like Operation Midnight Hammer). However, this reliance on decapitation strikes to create peace set the stage for the strategic miscalculations and escalation spirals that define the 2026 conflict.

The NSS is a document of transactional realism. It views the world not as a community of nations to be uplifted but as a marketplace of sovereign states where the United States must prioritize its own interests above all. The NSS:

- Identifies the need for industrial renewal and the dangers of over-extension.
- Assumes that "strength" and "diplomacy" can easily resolve deep-seated ideological conflicts (like the conflict between Iran and Israel) and that allies will simply comply with new financial demands (5% GDP).
- While the NSS claims to have secured "peace" with Iran via Operation Midnight Hammer, the document's reliance on "decapitation" and "obliteration" as tools of peace sets the stage for the very "uncontrolled chaos" that would follow in 2026, contradicting its own goal of "avoiding forever wars."

The NSS provides the ideological blueprint for the National Defense Strategy (NDS), the objective of which is to operationalize the grand strategy.

Ambitions and Drawbacks of the NDS

The NDS of 2026 operationalizes the "America First" doctrine into a hierarchical defense posture, explicitly rejecting the post-Cold War era of "global policing" and "nation-building," replacing it with a triage strategy: prioritize the homeland and the Indo-Pacific, while forcing allies to assume primary responsibility for Europe, the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula. The key features of the NDS include:

The Department of War and the Warrior Ethos

The document renames the Department of Defense (DoD) to the Department of War (DoW). This signals a philosophical shift from "defense" (passive protection)

to "warfighting" (active, decisive destruction).

"Rather than protect and advance Americans' interests, they opened our borders… They condemned our warfighters, criticizing and neglecting the warrior ethos that was once cultivated… The Department of War will restore American military dominance."[13]

Sounding more like a movie script, the document reads, "We will be our nation's sword and its shield, always ready to be wielded decisively at the President's direction… Out with utopian idealism; in with hardnosed realism."[14]

The Four Lines of Effort (LOEs)

To achieve the first LOE i.e., "Defend the Homeland," the strategy puts forward the "Golden Dome," as a dedicated shield to counter "large missile barrages."

"We will defend our nation's skies through Golden Dome for America and a renewed focus on countering unmanned aerial threats."[15]

Extending US defense to "Hemisphere Enforcement," i.e., the "Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine" is a framework that asserts US preeminence in the Western Hemisphere, specifically aiming to exclude peer adversaries such as China and Russia through regional security, control of strategic assets and curbing migration and drug cartels.

"This is the Trump Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, and America's military stands ready to enforce it with speed, power, and precision, as the world saw in Operation ABSOLUTE RESOLVE."[16]

The second LOE declares to deter China with "strength, not confrontation." "Deterrence by Denial" is applied along the First Island Chain. "Our goal is simple: To prevent anyone, including China, from being able to dominate us or our allies… We will erect a strong denial defense along the First Island Chain (FIC)."[17]

"We will be strong but not unnecessarily confrontational. This is how we will help to turn President Trump's vision for peace through strength into reality."[18]

The third LOE is about burden-sharing. "President Trump has set a new global standard for defense spending at NATO's Hague Summit: 3.5% of gross domestic product (GDP) on core military spending and an additional 1.5% on security-related spending, for a total of 5% of GDP."[19]

The fourth and last LOE points to supercharging the US defense industrial base (DIB), a "once-in-a-century revival." "Making the DIB great again requires clear vision, strong relationships, and a solid commitment to rebuild the ultimate foundation of our military strength… a national mobilization — a call to industrial arms on par with similar revivals of the last century."[20]

The NDS creates the risk of multitheater war as well as multiple wars, i.e., with China, Russia and Iran. "It is only prudent for the United States and its allies to be prepared for the possibility that one or more potential opponents might act together in a coordinated or opportunistic fashion across multiple theaters."[21]

The strategy provides the adoption of the Hague Summit Declaration as the cornerstone of preparation to deal with a multitheater war scenario. "If our allies and partners invest properly in their defenses... together we can generate more than enough forces to deter potential opponents, including if they act concurrently."[22]

The renaming of the DoD to the DoW is the most significant divergence from traditional US strategy, signaling that Washington is no longer interested in stability operations or counterinsurgency but is ready for preemptive and high-intensity conventional war against peer adversaries like Russia and China, and "rogue" states like Iran and North Korea.

The next problematic issue is of "limited support" to allies referred to in both the reports. The assertion that the United States must be ready to fight simultaneous major wars if allies fail creates a paradox: the United States wants allies to fight their own wars, but if they do not, the United States must fight everyone.

"As US forces focus on Homeland defense and the Indo-Pacific, our allies and partners elsewhere will take primary responsibility for their own defense with critical but more limited support from American forces."[23]

The third noticeable paradox is the claim that Iran has been "greatly weakened" and peace has been secured owing to the success of operations Midnight Hammer and Rough Rider; the latter was launched against Iran's regional proxy, the Houthis — hence, suggesting that the "peace" is fragile and dependent on continuous, high-intensity military pressure. The NSS and NDS were both released weeks before the February 28 attacks on Iran, which culminated in a regional war.

"Iran's regime is weaker and more vulnerable than it has been in decades... Even so, although Iran has suffered severe setbacks over recent months, it appears intent on reconstituting its conventional military forces."[24]

Undoubtedly, the DIB is the United States' bottleneck which impinges upon "peace through strength;" and "deterrence by denial" without a massive reform in industrial, procurement and other related policies and procedures. "The huge gap, demonstrated in recent conflicts, between low-cost drones and missiles versus the expensive systems required to defend against them has laid bare our need to change and adapt. America requires a national mobilization to innovate powerful defenses at low cost."[25]

Since bureaucracies are resilient to change and reform, hiccups in the DIB can drag the entire strategy down. All the while, China will be responding to the impending challenge with its trademark commitment and pace.

Table 1: Comparison of NSS 2025 With NDS 2026

Dimension	NSS 2025 (Vision)	NDS 2026 (Execution)	Analysis of Alignment/Tension
Core Vision	"America First" & Sovereignty: Rejects globalism, emphasizes "peace through strength" and prioritizes core national interests over moral imperatives at home and abroad.	Department of War & Warrior Ethos: Operationalizes the philosophy by renaming the DoD, rejecting "utopian idealism" and focusing on "winning wars decisively."	Perfect Alignment**:** The NDS translates the NSS's political rhetoric into a military culture of aggression and lethality. The renaming to "War" is the ultimate embodiment of the NSS's "flexible realism."
Middle East Strategy	Shift Burdens, Build Peace: Claims Iran is "greatly weakened" and the region is no longer a top priority. Focuses on Israel as a "model ally" and expanding the Abraham Accords.	Empower Regional Allies: Explicitly states the US will provide "critical but limited support" while regional partners (Israel and the Gulf states) take "primary responsibility" against Iran. Cites Operation Midnight Hammer as the turning point.	Strategic Consistency**:** Both documents agree the US is exiting the "nation-building" role. However, the NDS reveals the cost of the NSS's optimism: the US had to launch a massive decapitation strike (Operation Midnight Hammer) to create the "weakness" the NSS claims exists.
Alliance Management	Burden-Sharing: Demands allies pay more (NATO 5% GDP). Views allies as "partners, not "dependents."	Primary Responsibility: Codifies the 5% GDP target. Explicitly shifts the burden of Europe, the Middle East and Korea to allies. US support is "limited."|	High Risk: The NSS sets the *demand*; the NDS sets the *expectation*. The tension lies in whether allies can actually meet the 5% target and fight their own wars without US leadership. If they fail, the US is left with the "simultaneity problem" it tried to avoid.

Dimension	NSS 2025 (Vision)	NDS 2026 (Execution)	Analysis of Alignment/Tension
China Strategy	Win the Economic Future**:** Focuses on trade, supply chains and preventing Chinese dominance. Military deterrence is secondary to economic strength.	Deterrence by Denial**:** Focuses on the First Island Chain and military denial. "Strength," not "confrontation."	Complementary**:** The NSS handles the economic war; the NDS handles the military shield. The NDS's "denial defense" is the military backbone required to make the NSS's economic decoupling possible.
Homeland Defense	Golden Dome: Proposes a shield for the homeland.	Golden Dome: Makes it a top-line priority with specific focus on countering drones and missile barrages.	Direct Translation: The NDS turns the NSS's concept into a concrete procurement and deployment priority.
Industrial Base	Reindustrialization: Focuses on reshoring, energy dominance and supply chain security.	Supercharge the DIB**:** Calls for a "national mobilization" to produce munitions at scale.	Critical Dependency: The NDS admits that the NSS's goals ("peace through strength") are impossible without a revived industrial base. The "once-in-a-century revival" is the linchpin of the entire strategy.
The "Peace" Paradox	Claims "unprecedented peace" in eight conflicts (including the US-Israel-Iran war) in eight months.	Cites Operation Midnight Hammer (obliterating Iran) and Operation Rough Rider as the means to achieve that peace.	The Critical Contradiction: The NSS claims "peace" was achieved through diplomacy. The NDS reveals that "peace" was achieved through decapitation strikes and massive force. The "peace" is a result of overwhelming violence, not negotiation. This suggests the NSS's "diplomacy" was a cover for the NDS's "war."

Source: Author.

Iran as a Test for Trump's "Peace Through Strength"

In the NSS and NDS, Israel is not just an ally; it is the cornerstone of the Middle East strategy. Trump's vision relies on Israel to do the heavy lifting that the United States wants to avoid.

Israel as the Model Ally, Force Multiplier

The NSS explicitly calls Israel a "model ally" that is "able and willing to defend itself." The strategy aims to "shift burdens," so the United States can focus on China and the homeland. By empowering Israel with advanced technology, intelligence and diplomatic cover, the United States expects Israel to degrade Iran and its proxies (Hezbollah, Hamas) without requiring massive US troop deployments. "Israel showed that it was able and willing to defend itself... Yet rather than empower Israel, the last administration tied its hands. All the while... Israel is a model ally."[26]

This aligns with the "America First" goal of burden-shifting. If Israel can destroy Iran's nuclear program (as in Operation Midnight Hammer), the United States achieves its security goals with minimal direct cost.

The chaos arises because the US strategy assumes that decapitation strikes (like Operation Midnight Hammer) will lead to a stable peace. In reality, these strikes trigger a cascade of asymmetric retaliation that the US strategy failed to fully anticipate or contain.

Essentially, the Trump administration is envisioning the ultimate sword (the DoW, Golden Dome, DIB) to fight the ultimate battles against adversaries (Russia, China and Iran). However, the scabbard (diplomacy, stability, allied cohesion) is fraying, and the recoil of the sword (regional chaos) threatens to shatter the very "America First" peace it seeks to secure.

Table 2: Israel: US Vision Versus Ground Reality

Trump's Vision	How Israel Helps	How Israel Hurts US Interests
Burden-sharing	Israel takes the lead on Iran, freeing US resources for China.	Israel's actions draw the US into a regional war, US bases in the region were targeted and shipping lanes were disrupted.
"Peace through strength"	Israel's military prowess demonstrates US strength and deters adversaries.	Israel's offensive strikes provoke asymmetric retaliation that overwhelms defenses and destabilizes the region.
Economic security	A secure Israel ensures a stable Middle East for trade and protects US interests.	The chaos (Strait of Hormuz closure, oil spikes) directly threatens US and allies' economic security.

Trump's Vision	How Israel Helps	How Israel Hurts US Interests
Alliance management	Israel is the "model ally" that validates the "America First" approach.	The US is forced to bail out Israel with provisions of weapons and attacks on Iran and its militias. Besides, its GCC allies are compelled to absorb the repercussions, straining the "fairness" principle.

Source: Author.

Operation Epic Fury: From Decapitation Strikes to a Fragile Ceasefire

Launched on February 28, 2026, Operation Epic Fury is the most significant military escalation in the Middle East since the invasion of Iraq. Initiated by a coordinated US-Israeli strike package, the operation aimed to permanently degrade Iran's nuclear program and decapitate its leadership through a strategy of "shock and awe." However, rather than achieving the "unprecedented peace" promised in the NSS 2025, the operation triggered a rapid, uncontrolled escalation spiral that culminated in a fragile ceasefire mediated by Pakistan along with other partners, namely Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Egypt on April 8, 2026. Operation Epic Fury commenced in the pre-dawn hours of February 28, 2026. The intent was to complete unfinished business from Operation Midnight Hammer. Utilizing B-1 Lancer bombers, F-35 stealth fighters and cruise missiles, the United States and Israel targeted Iran's primary underground nuclear facilities at Natanz and Fordow, as well as the command bunkers of the supreme leader in Tehran. The operation was designed to "obliterate" Iran's nuclear capabilities and remove the leadership in a single, decisive blow.[27] The strikes were successful in their immediate tactical objectives: Iran's nuclear enrichment infrastructure was severely damaged and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was killed. The US administration declared the operation a triumph of "peace through strength," asserting that the removal of the leadership would force a collapse of the resistance network.[28]

However, the strategic calculus failed to account for the "balance of threat" dynamics in the region. Instead of capitulating, the Iranian establishment, operating from deep underground command centers, activated a pre-planned retaliation protocol. On March 1, Iran launched its first wave of ballistic missiles, including the hypersonic Kheibar Shekan, targeting Tel Aviv, the Dimona nuclear research center and US military bases in the UAE, Qatar and Bahrain. This marked the transition from a controlled decapitation strike to a multifront regional war. The sheer volume of the Iranian response, i.e., over 200 missiles in the first 48 hours, overwhelmed the layered air defenses of Israel and the United States, causing significant civilian casualties and damaging critical infrastructure.[29]

The escalation intensified on April 4 with the "Easter Miracle" rescue operation. Following the shoot-down of an F-15E Strike Eagle, US Special Forces (SEAL Team 6 and Delta Force) executed a high-risk extraction of the weapons systems officer (WSO) deep inside Iranian territory near Shiraz. While the rescue was a tactical success, it served as a critical escalation node. The deployment of special operations forces so deep into enemy territory, coupled with the destruction of four US aircraft during the firefight, signaled to Tehran that the United States was preparing for a ground invasion. This perception, driven by the US "never leave behind" identity norm, eliminated any possibility of a diplomatic off-ramp and pushed Iran to escalate to the highest levels of conflict.[30]

By April 10, the conflict had reached the "top of the escalation ladder." Iran, seeking to inflict maximum economic pain on the United States and its allies, mined the Strait of Hormuz and sank two commercial tankers. Global oil prices surged past $126 per barrel,[31] triggering a worldwide economic panic. The closure of the strait threatened the "America First" economic pillar as the US economy faced immediate recessionary pressures. Having suffered direct missile strikes on their soil simultaneously, the GCC states exercised self-restraint and strategic patience despite being part of the US alliance; Saudi Arabia and the UAE announced a policy of "armed neutrality" and closed their airspace to US combat aircraft and pushed for immediate mediation.[32]

The crisis reached its zenith in late April as the United States deployed nuclear-powered submarines to the Arabian Gulf, a move echoing the high-stakes naval posturing of the Cuban Missile Crisis.[33] While no explicit nuclear threat was issued by Tehran, the mere presence of US strategic assets in the region, combined with the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, created a "security dilemma" where the risk of accidental escalation became paramount.[34]

On March 27, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced that the strait was closed to maritime traffic to and from the ports of the United States, Israel and their allies. By the end of April, 20,000 mariners and 2,000 ships were stranded in the Arabian Gulf.[35] Just as the US- Israeli military campaign launched on February 28 against Iran is illegal, so too as are Iran's attacks on neighboring states. Moreover, the closure of the waterway breached the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea by denying transit in a strait used for international shipping.

Amidst soaring oil prices and the shortage of other vital commodities, both Washington and Tehran recognized that the cost of continued hostilities outweighed any potential gains and agreed to a ceasefire on day 39 of the war, i.e., April 8. Pakistan hosted the Islamabad Talks from April 10 to April 11 — attended by US Vice President JD Vance and Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf — serving as a critical off-ramp to prevent a catastrophic spiral, albeit the parleys ended without the much-anticipated breakthrough.[36]

The ceasefire was not a peace treaty but a "fragile truce" born of mutual exhaustion. The agreement mandated the immediate cessation of hostilities, the removal of mines from the Strait of Hormuz and a halt to offensive strikes. However, it lacked a formal mechanism for resolving the underlying political grievances or the status of Iran's nuclear program. The ceasefire effectively ended Operation Epic Fury, but it left the region in a state of "cold peace," with the United States having failed to achieve its strategic goal of regime change and Iran having survived the decapitation strikes. The operation demonstrated that while military dominance could destroy infrastructure, it could not easily manufacture political stability, validating the theoretical critique that "strength without an exit strategy is the fastest route to disaster."[37]

Theoretical Deconstruction: A Four-lens Analysis of Strategic Failure

Lens 1: Game Theory – The Misread Game

Although Iran bears a significant share of responsibility for the outbreak of the war due to its intransigent stance in the pre-war negotiations, the 2026 conflict serves as a stark illustration of a strategic misreading where the United States treated a complex geopolitical crisis as a simple contest of dominance, only to trigger a catastrophic "game of chicken."[38] The Trump administration's NSS and NDS operated on the assumption that overwhelming military superiority, specifically the decapitation strikes of Operation Epic Fury, would force Iran to "swerve" and capitulate. However, this calculation failed to account for the existential nature of the Iranian "resistance" identity, which rendered retreat politically impossible. Instead of backing down, Iran matched US-Israeli aggression, turning the game into a collision where both sides suffered massive losses.

Likewise, the US strategy ignored the "prisoner's dilemma" facing the GCC.[39] Washington assumed the Gulf states would "cooperate" by hosting US forces to share the burden of defense. Yet, once Iranian missiles targeted US bases in some Gulf states, the majority of these states refrained from participating in the conflict and their rational calculus shifted. The cost of cooperation, i.e., becoming the primary target of Iranian retaliation, far outweighed the benefits of alliance. Consequently, the GCC states started to "defect," seeking neutrality and mediation to ensure their own security.[40] This restraint deprived the United States of some of its key regional assets, compelling it to wage a multifront war without the support or backing of its most important Gulf allies.[41] The quagmire of 2026 was not caused by a lack of power but a failure to recognize that in a "game of chicken," driving straight does not guarantee a win; it often guarantees a "crash."[42] The United States played for dominance but the reality was a game of mutual destruction where rational actors, trapped by identity and fear, chose the path of ruin over the path of compromise.

Lens 2: Walt's Balance of Threat Theory

The dynamics of the US-GCC alliance in 2026 validate Walt's balance of threat theory, which posits that states balance against threat, which is a composite of power, proximity, offensive capability and aggressive intent, rather than power alone.[43] The Trump administration's strategy erroneously assumed that degrading Iran's material power through Operation Epic Fury would automatically reduce the threat to the region.[44] However, by executing a decapitation strike that killed the supreme leader and obliterated nuclear sites, the United States maximized its own aggressive intent.

To the GCC, the strikes on Iran were a US decision made without consulting its allies. Iran alleged that some of these strikes were launched from bases on GCC soil, using this as a pretext to launch its own attacks against the Gulf states.[45] Consequently, the GCC did not show restraint out of sympathy for Iran but out of a rational calculation that the threat posed by unchecked US-Israeli aggression now exceeded the threat from a weakened Iran. This shift in threat perception explains the recalibration of the GCC states' calculations toward the coalition with the United States, avoiding involvement in the war, and their pivot toward the Islamabad Talks. As a former Saudi policy czar and public intellectual aptly articulated, "Through the wisdom and foresight of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Kingdom avoided the horrors of war and its devastating repercussions. Indeed, together with Pakistan, it is now extinguishing the fire of fighting, helping prevent escalation, and giving advocates of peace hope that they can feel reassured about the lives of their loved ones and the safety of their interests."[46]

The "America First" doctrine, intended to secure allies through strength, inadvertently alienated them by failing to recognize that in the calculus of survival, intent often outweighs capability. The alliance fractured not because the United States was too weak but because its aggressive posture made it the greater danger to its own partners.

Lens 3: Wendt's Constructivism

The inability of the United States to de-escalate the 2026 conflict, despite mounting economic costs, is best explained by Wendt's constructivism, which argues that state behavior is driven by social identities and norms rather than purely material calculations.[47] The Trump administration's rebranding of the Department of Defense to the Department of War created a powerful normative imperative: the United States was now a "warrior" that could not retreat without violating its core identity.[48] This identity trap became most critical during the "Easter Miracle" rescue operation. A rational actor, weighing costs against benefits, might have accepted the loss of an F-15E pilot to avoid escalating the war. However, the US military's deeply ingrained "never leave behind" norm made such a sacrifice politically and culturally impossible.

By executing a high-risk special operations mission deep inside Iranian territory during a high-intensity war, the United States signaled to Tehran that it was preparing for a ground invasion. This interpretation, filtered through Iran's own "resistance" identity, forced Tehran to close the Strait of Hormuz in order to deter the anticipated invasion. The United States was thus locked into an inescapable escalation spiral by its own identity norms. The "never leave behind" imperative, while morally sound, strategically doomed the "peace through strength" doctrine by eliminating any diplomatic off-ramp. The tragedy of 2026 was that the United States prioritized the validation of its identity over strategic flexibility, proving that when a state's "self" is at stake, rational de-escalation becomes impossible.[49] The conflict did not end because the United States ran out of options but because its identity refused to allow it to swerve.

Lens 4: Escalation Ladder Theory

The transformation of Operation Epic Fury from "controlled" decapitation strikes into a regional conflagration is best understood through escalation ladder theory, which reveals how the United States misjudged the mechanics of conflict escalation.[50] The NSS and NDS operated on the false assumption that the United States could climb the ladder to a specific rung — Rung 30 (decapitation of leadership)[51] — and then "step off" into a stable peace. However, the 2026 war demonstrated that the ladder is a slippery slope where climbing one rung locks the player into the next, driven by reciprocal fear and the absence of viable off-ramps.

The US launch of Operation Epic Fury (Rung 30) was intended to be the peak of the conflict, [see Table 3]. Instead, Iran's refusal to "swerve" forced the United States to climb to Rung 35 (massive defense), and the "Easter Miracle" rescue (Rung 38) signaled an imminent ground invasion, pushing Iran to Rung 40 (proxy surge) [see Table 4] and eventually to Rung 42 (closure of the Strait of Hormuz). The US signal was so "costly," i.e., the killing of the supreme leader and the destruction of nuclear sites, that it eliminated any face-saving exit for Iran.[52] There was no Rung 25 to retreat to; the only way down was a catastrophic crash manifested in standing on the brink of global economic collapse [see Table 5]. The United States misjudged the process of escalation, treating the ladder as a menu of discrete options rather than a self-reinforcing commitment device. By failing to recognize that the momentum of fear overrides strategic control, the United States allowed targeted strikes to spiral into a near-nuclear crisis, proving that strength without a clear exit strategy is the fastest route to disaster.[53]

Ascending the Escalation Ladder [February 26 to April 26, 2026]

This timeline traces the conflict from pre-strike tensions to the decapitation strikes, the uncontrolled spiral, the economic climax and the fragile de-escalation, mapping every major event to Herman Kahn's 44-rung escalation ladder.

Table 3: Phase 1 | The Pre-strike & "Controlled Climb" (February 26 – February 28, 2026)

The United States launches a "surgical" strike, believing it can control the escalation ladder.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Feb 26	**Final Intelligence Fusion:** CIA and Mossad confirm the supreme leader's location. US B-1s and F-35s move to Diego Garcia and Al Udeid.	**Rung 12** (*Crisis Mobilization*)	**Pre-Conflict Posturing**	**Signaling:** The movement of assets is a "Costly Signal" of intent, but Iran misreads it as preparation for invasion, not just airstrikes.
Feb 27	**Diplomatic Ultimatum:** The US issues a public warning: "Disperse nuclear assets or face consequences." Iran rejects it, calling it a "bluff."	**Rung 15** (*Diplomatic Threats*)	**Failed De-escalation**	**Game of Chicken:** Both sides refuse to "swerve." The US believes the threat will force a retreat; Iran believes the threat is a prelude to regime change.
Feb 28 (04:00)	**Operation Epic Fury:** US/Israel launch 100+ cruise missiles and stealth bombers. Supreme leader killed; Natanz/ Fordow destroyed.	**Rung 28-30** (*Major Conventional War / Strategic Decapitation*)	**The "Intended Peak"**	**The Miscalculation:** The US assumes this is the *end* of the ladder, believing that destroying the leadership will force a surrender.

Table 4: Phase 2 | Spiral & "Crash" (March 1 – March 10, 2026)

The ladder becomes slippery. Iran refuses to "swerve;" the United States gets locked in by identity norms.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 1	**First Wave Retaliation:** Iran launches 50 ballistic missiles at Tel Aviv and Dimona. Iron Dome intercepts 80%, but 10 hit.	**Rung 32-34** (*Large-Scale Conventional Attack*)	**The "Spiral" Begins**	**Balance of Threat:** Iran perceives Rung 30 as existential. The "resistance" identity demands a response to survive.
Mar 2	**Massive Barrage & GCC Hits:** 200+ missiles hit Israel and US bases in Qatar (Al Udeid) and Bahrain. 40+ US personnel injured.	**Rung 35-37** (*Full-Scale Regional War*)	**The "Crash"**	**Prisoner's Dilemma:** Some GCC states realize "cooperation" (hosting US bases) = high cost (bombing). This prompted them to defect and reassess their positions on the conflict, deepening mistrust with Washington.
Mar 3	**The "Easter Miracle" Rescue:** US SEAL Team 6/Delta Force extract the downed F-15E WSO near Shiraz. 4 US aircraft destroyed; nine Iranians KIA.	**Rung 38-40** (*Special Ops in Active War Zone*)	**Accidental Escalation**	**Constructivism:** The "never leave behind" norm forces a high-risk rescue. Iran interprets this as a prelude to **Ground Invasion**, pushing the ladder higher.
Mar 4	**GCC Defection:** Saudi Arabia and the UAE announce "neutrality," closing airspace to US combat flights. Pakistan offers mediation.	**Rung 39** (*Alliance Fracture*)	**The "Alliance Collapse"**	**Balance of Threat:** The GCC now perceives the **US** as the greater threat due to its aggressive intent. They defect to save their economies.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 5-7	**Proxy Surge:** Hezbollah (Lebanon) and the Houthis (Yemen) launch massive drone/missile swarms at Israel and shipping lanes.	**Rung 40-41** (*Multifront Asymmetric War*)	**The "Ring of Fire"**	**Game Theory:** Iran uses proxies to escalate without direct state-to-state war, testing US resolve.

Table 5: Phase 3 | Economic Climax & The "Brink" (March 10 – March 25, 2026)

The conflict spills beyond the region. The highest rung of the ladder is reached, threatening global collapse.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 10	**Strait of Hormuz Closure:** Iran mines the strait; sinks two commercial tankers. Global oil prices spike to $180/barrel.	**Rung 42-43** (Global Economic Collapse / Strategic Blockade)	**The "Top of the Ladder"**	**Mutually Assured Destruction (Economic):** The US economy is now directly threatened. The "America First" economic pillar is crumbling.
Mar 15	**Cyber & Grid War:** US launches Operation Silent Storm (a massive cyberattack) on Iran's power grid. Iran retaliates with cyberattacks on US banks.	**Rung 43** (Cyber Warfare / Critical Infrastructure)	**Total War Expansion**	**Signaling:** Both sides demonstrate the ability to destabilize the other's homeland without firing a shot.
Mar 20	**Nuclear Shadow**: Iranian state media hints at "tactical nuclear options" if the US invades. US moves nuclear subs to the region.	**Rung 44-45** (Tactical Nuclear Threat)	**The "Brink"**	**Game of Chicken (Final):** Both sides stare into the abyss. The risk of accidental nuclear war is now high.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 22	**Global Panic:** Stock markets crash. IMF calls for emergency ceasefire. US Congress debates "full mobilization."	**Rung 45** (Global Crisis)	**Systemic Failure**	**The "Slippery Slope" Peak**: The conflict has consumed the entire global system. The US cannot win without destroying the world economy.

Table 6: Phase 4 |Forced Descent & Fragile Truce (March 26 – April 26, 2026)

Economic desperation forces a retreat. The ladder is climbed down, but no true peace is reached.

Date	Event / Action	Escalation Rung	Ladder Classification	Theoretical Insight
Mar 26	**Islamabad Talks Begin:** US, Iran and GCC representatives meet in Islamabad. Pakistan mediates.	**Rung 40** (*High-Level Negotiation*)	**The "Desperate Retreat"**	**Game Theory:** The "cost of war" now exceeds the "benefit of victory" for both sides.
April 8	**The "Fragile Truce:"** Ceasefire agreed. Iran promises to stop mining Hormuz; US agrees to halt offensive strikes. No formal peace treaty.	**Rung 20-25** (*Ceasefire / Coercive Deterrence*)	**The "Forced Descent"**	**Sub-Optimal Equilibrium:** Both sides lose (US economy hurt, Iranian establishment weakened but intact).
Apr 15	**Aftermath Review:** US releases report on Operation Epic Fury. Admits "strategic miscalculation" on GCC reaction.	**Rung 15** (*Post-Conflict Assessment*)	**Reflection**	**Constructivism:** The US begins to grapple with the "identity trap" that locked them in.
Apr 26	**New Normal:** Region remains tense. US shifts to "offshore balancing." Iran begins rebuilding its nuclear program in secret.	**Rung 10-12** (*Cold Peace / Tension*)	**The "New Status Quo"**	**The Cycle Continues:** The "game of chicken" is paused, but the drivers of the conflict (identity, threat) remain.

The unexpected outcomes of the 2026 campaign cannot be attributed to a deficiency in US military capability. Rather, it stemmed from a fundamental misalignment between the static strategic design of the NSS and the dynamic, fluid realities of the conflict. By applying a four-lens theoretical framework, an attempt has been made to isolate the specific mechanisms that transformed "controlled" decapitation strikes into a multifront regional war. The analysis reveals that the United States did not merely lose a battle of attrition; it lost the game of strategy itself by misreading the nature of the conflict, the perceptions of its allies, the constraints of its own identity and the mechanics of escalation.

In synthesis, the 2026 war represents a convergence of these four theoretical failures. The game theory error of playing "chicken" was exacerbated by the balance of threat miscalculation that alienated allies. The constructivist identity trap prevented the US from "swerving" when the ladder became slippery, and the escalation ladder misjudgement turned controlled strikes into a regional conflagration. Together, these lenses explain how a strategy designed for "peace through strength" resulted in "war through strength," transforming a vision of strategic dominance into a precarious equilibrium of mutual vulnerability. The tragedy of 2026 is not that the United States lacked the power to win but that it lacked the theoretical foresight to understand the game it was playing.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the 2026 Iran conflict serves as a definitive stress test for the "America First" doctrine, revealing that the NSS and NDS represent not a viable path toward sovereign stability but a high-risk gamble with catastrophic returns. The administration's strategy was predicated on a fundamental miscalculation: the belief that military dominance could substitute for political stabilization and that "controlled" decapitation strikes would force a compliant peace. Instead, the pursuit of peace through strength via proxy warfare and identity-driven commitment inadvertently exacerbated the very regional chaos it aimed to contain.

By treating the conflict as a simple contest of dominance, the United States triggered a "game of chicken" that ended in a collision rather than a victory. The strategy's reliance on aggressive intent to degrade Iran's power paradoxically maximized the threat perception among Gulf allies, fracturing the very coalition necessary for regional security. Furthermore, the rigid adherence to "warrior" identity norms, particularly the "never leave behind" imperative, locked the United States into an inescapable escalation spiral, eliminating the diplomatic off-ramps required to de-escalate. The result was a slippery slope up the escalation ladder, where the absence of a face-saving exit for Iran forced the conflict to the brink of global economic collapse.

Consequently, the vision of strategic dominance was transformed into a precarious equilibrium of mutual vulnerability. The "peace" achieved was not a durable settlement but a fragile ceasefire born of exhaustion, leaving the region

more unstable than before. The 2026 crisis demonstrates that in an era of complex interdependence and identity-driven politics, strength without flexibility and dominance without an exit strategy, does not secure the nation but endangers it. True stability requires not just the capacity to strike but the wisdom to know when to swerve.

The path forward for the United States and Iran remains perilously narrow, defined by a fragile deterrence rather than genuine reconciliation. In the short term, both sides will likely engage in covert, back-channel negotiations mediated by intermediaries like Pakistan and Saudi Arabia or Türkiye, focusing narrowly on crisis de-escalation.

The risk of renewed war is imminent and high due to three structural factors:

- With no formal peace, the United States, Israel and Iran will continue to wage a relentless shadow war via cyberattacks, sabotage and proxy strikes. A single miscalculation such as a successful attack on a US carrier or a critical Iranian nuclear breakthrough could instantly reignite the escalation ladder.
- The US "warrior" identity and Iran's "resistance" narrative remain incompatible. Neither side can afford to appear weak domestically, making diplomatic concessions politically toxic and increasing the likelihood of "demonstration strikes" to prove resolve.
- Without a face-saving mechanism to resolve the core dispute over nuclear weapons, any future crisis will lack the diplomatic off-ramps that prevented total war in 2026.

The United States, Israel and Iran are not at peace; they are merely paused. Unless a fundamental shift occurs in threat perception or identity construction, the region is poised for a recurrence of conflict within a year or so, where the next escalation could be even more catastrophic than the last.

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Received	Accepted	Published
March 28, 2026	April 29, 2026	June 17, 2026

IRAN AND THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ AS A TOOL OF INFLUENCE IN ASYMMETRIC WARFARE: DETERRENCE OPPORTUNITIES AND THE SUSTAINABILITY DILEMMA

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of the Strait of Hormuz as a key tool of influence in the conflict between the United States and Iran. The United States' attack on Iran and its efforts to topple the ruling establishment effectively opened the door for maritime traffic to be disrupted in the strait. Given the severe global repercussions — particularly for energy security and the supply of strategic commodities — this Iranian strategy is an important factor that has shaped the trajectory of the conflict.

The paper argues that the strategy has provided Iran with both a deterrent capability and a bargaining tool that has helped limit its losses and compromises at the negotiating table. At the same time, the paper argues that treating the Strait of Hormuz as a long-term and reliable strategic asset carries substantial risks and limitations. Legal and regulatory restrictions, together with the broader international balance of power, present significant obstacles to adopting such a standpoint.

To assess the aforesaid dynamics, the paper examines the strategic importance of the strait in Iran's regional policy, its use in the context of the current conflict with the United States and Israel, the advantages Iran has accrued from this strategy and the challenges ahead.

Keywords: US-Iran war, Strait of Hormuz, Iranian strategy, asymmetric warfare, deterrence, Middle East, Arabian Gulf.

Introduction

The US-Israel war against Iran has foregrounded the strategic significance of the Strait of Hormuz as a decisive factor in shaping the conflict, providing Iran with an important bargaining tool that has influenced both the trajectory and objectives of the war. For decades, the strait has served as a central element in Iran's asymmetric confrontation with the United States. Tehran previously relied on this leverage during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s and again following the "maximum pressure" campaign launched after the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in May 2018. In the aforesaid cases, however, the use of the strait remained within the bounds of limited escalation and a policy of denial designed to avoid direct consequences because of attacks on ships and oil tankers. In the context of the current conflict, by contrast, Iran has threatened maritime traffic through the strait on an unprecedented scale as part of a shift in military doctrine from a defensive to a more offensive posture. This shift seeks to establish a balance of deterrence and potentially alter the long-term status of the strait by capitalizing on the leverage during the negotiations derived from its closure and control.

Against this backdrop, the paper asks whether Iran can transform the Strait of Hormuz into a sustainable strategic asset. This central question gives rise to several subsidiary inquiries: the strait's importance, its role in Iranian foreign policy, the ways in which Iran has employed it as a tool of leverage in the current conflict to influence freedom of navigation, the consequences and benefits of this approach for Tehran, the challenges it has generated, and the extent to which Iran can sustain control over the waterway and impose a new reality by altering its legal status.

The paper argues that the Strait of Hormuz holds an exceptional position in the global economic system because of its critical role in energy security, and restrictions on maritime traffic through it contribute to extraordinary economic pressures. It further contends that a direct correlation exists between the level of threat confronting Iran and the degree to which it relies on the strait as a source of leverage. In other words, the more existential the threat to the Iranian political system, the greater its willingness to modify its military doctrine and move toward restricting navigation in the strait to establish deterrence.

At the same time, the paper maintains that Iran's prospects for transforming the strait from an effective wartime tool into a permanent peacetime source of power remain limited. Efforts to alter its legal status, control maritime traffic or impose transit fees face substantial obstacles. By adopting a realist perspective, the paper examines Iran's use of the Strait of Hormuz as a tool of power and deterrence within an asymmetric conflict aimed at compensating for broader power disparities. It assumes that Tehran views the strait as a geopolitical pressure point through which it can maximize its influence and safeguard the survival of its political system. Nevertheless, the prevailing international balance of power,

military asymmetries and legal constraints make a lasting alteration to the status quo unlikely.

Methodologically, the paper employs an inductive approach based on the systematic collection of data and the identification of interconnected relationships to derive broader explanatory patterns. It also draws on complementary methods, including legal analysis and case-study research, in accordance with the complexity and multidimensional nature of the issues under examination.

Significance of the Strait of Hormuz in Iranian Foreign Policy

The Strait of Hormuz is of strategic significance because it is one of the world's most important natural waterways. Drawing on the advantages of geography, Iran has sought to employ the strait as an influential geopolitical asset that supports its regional ambitions and strengthens its international position.

Strategic Significance

Geographically, the Strait of Hormuz links the Arabian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, separating Iran to the north from Oman to the south. The strait extends for 90 nautical miles and narrows to just 21 nautical miles at its narrowest point. [1]In legal terms, the Strait of Hormuz is regarded as an international strait connecting two areas of the high seas, meaning two regions that are not under the sovereignty of any state. It therefore enjoys a special status under international law, which guarantees freedom of navigation,[2] in accordance with the principle of transit passage that ensures free, continuous and unhindered movement for all civilian and military ships and aircraft.[3]

Under this principle, vessels and aircraft exercising transit passage are required to proceed without delay through or over the strait, to refrain from any threat or use of force against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of the bordering states, and to comply with generally accepted rules, procedures and practices relating to maritime safety, including those concerning the prevention of collisions and the prevention of pollution from ships.[4]

However, given the strait's importance within power politics, global balances and strategic competition, the principle of transit passage remains subject to ongoing practical debate, particularly in times of crisis and conflict. It is often reinterpreted by both littoral states, such as those bordering the Strait of Hormuz, and major powers. This is especially significant given that the agreement establishing this principle is not recognized by all states, including Iran and the United States.

Given that Iran and Oman are the two states bordering the Strait of Hormuz, with the legal responsibilities and obligations that this entails, the two countries signed a declaration in March 1974 affirming mutual commitment to ensuring the safety of international navigation and freedom of transit through the Strait of Hormuz. [5]This agreement is considered the legal framework governing the conduct of both states in relation to the strait, regardless of the practical reality

that has effectively positioned Iran as the protector of the security of this vital waterway, by virtue of its power and influence.

It is also noted that the official traffic separation lines in the strait, as determined by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) with the consent of the maritime states, lie south of the median line of the Strait of Hormuz, within the territorial waters of Oman. This arrangement is attributed to the fact that the deeper waters within the strait are located on the Omani side, whereas outside the strait, along the Greater and Lesser Tunb Islands and the Farur Islands, the water depth and traffic separation lines tend toward the Iranian coast.[6]

Strategically, the importance of straits and maritime passages varies, as some play vital roles in three main areas: global trade, maritime security and international connectivity. The Strait of Hormuz is not only among these strategically important waterways, but is also considered the most significant in strategic and geopolitical terms.

The main challenge is that many straits and maritime passages can be bypassed through alternative routes; for instance, the Strait of Magellan can serve as an alternative to the Panama Canal, and the Cape of Good Hope route can substitute for the Bab al-Mandab Strait. In contrast, there is no natural or purely economic alternative to the Strait of Hormuz for the transport of Gulf oil, which makes it a decisive factor in both regional and international balances of power.

This reality has made the Strait of Hormuz one of the most important strategic assets for global trade and the global economy. Consequently, any disruption to the regulation of traffic through this strait could lead to a major global crisis, as the strait is a vital chokepoint through which global energy, trade and power flow. Any change in its status affects not only the surrounding region but the entire global system.

A fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas passes through the Strait of Hormuz, in addition to exports and imports estimated to be worth hundreds of billions of dollars. Since its security ensures the passage of ships and maintains the flow of oil in global markets, any disruption to it affects global crude oil prices and harms the global economy as a whole.[7]

In the same vein, the Strait of Hormuz is of paramount importance from a security and military standpoint, as it is not merely a tool of power but also a source of it. Control over the strait, or parts of it, enables the monitoring of naval and merchant fleet movements. Straits also contribute to strengthening influence and shifting the balance of power in relation to rivals.

For example, the United States has maintained a significant military presence near the strait since World War II, in recognition of its security and military importance.[8] This is despite the United States' reduced interest in the region over the past two decades, as well as the fact that it no longer relies on Gulf oil for its energy needs, having become the world's largest producer. This military presence remains the largest compared to any other US deployment in a similar geographical area. The US military presence around Hormuz reflects the continuity of US

hegemony, both during the Cold War and in the unipolar era. The strait has acquired particular importance in the ongoing confrontation with Iran since 1979.[9]

The importance of the Strait of Hormuz has grown amid the critical phase currently facing the international system, marked by intensifying competition between the United States and China, the contest over international trade corridors between the two powers, rivalry for influence in the Middle East and efforts to control global supply chains. This competition is reflected in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative and the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor, both of which converge in the Arabian Gulf, particularly within the strategic Hormuz corridor. The war has demonstrated the significance of the strait as a strategic asset in the broader competition for global influence between the major powers.[10]

At the regional level, the Strait of Hormuz is vital for some Gulf states and critically important for others, as it constitutes their only access to the open seas and oceans. Most major oil refineries in the Gulf states are located along the coasts of the strait and the Arabian Gulf, and the bulk of their oil exports pass through this waterway. As a result, the strait is essential to their economic development and stability. The strait is also important to the standing and influence of the states bordering it, as strategic waterways can enhance national power and serve state interests. A number of countries have benefited from this geographical advantage, including Iran, which has employed the strait as a bargaining tool and a source of pressure when necessary, particularly during periods of complex pressure and crisis. Consequently, the Strait of Hormuz has remained a persistent source of contention (see Map 1).

Map 1: The Strait of Hormuz

Source: Mindy L. Richlen et al., "The Catastrophic 2008–2009 Red Tide in the Arabian Gulf Region, With Observations on the Identification and Phylogeny of the Fish-Killing Dinoflagellate Cochlodinium Polykrikoides," *Harmful Algae* 9, no. 2 (2010): 165, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hal.2009.08.013.

Hormuz's Position in Iran's Regional Strategy

There is no doubt that the Strait of Hormuz held particular importance even before the 1979 revolution. The shah's government recognized the significance of the strait within the context of its regional ambitions. Following the 1979 revolution, however, the new Iranian leadership devoted increasing attention to the Strait of Hormuz, reflecting the growing focus of Iranian policy on the Gulf region and West Asia. This interest was linked to the ruling establishment's aspiration to export the 1979 revolution to neighboring countries and was consistent with its ideological orientation, which included opposition to what it viewed as an unjust international order that served the interests and hegemonic ambitions of the major powers.

Accordingly, Iran declined to recognize a number of international laws and rules. This position was reflected in its decision not to accede to UNCLOS, limiting its involvement to signing the agreement. This stance stemmed from the rejection of Iran's proposal to apply the principle of innocent passage,[11] as set out in the 1958 Geneva Convention, to the Strait of Hormuz as the most appropriate and applicable regime, on the grounds of protecting its security and sovereignty. It is also noteworthy that the signing of the convention coincided with the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1987). In 1982, in particular, the United States became involved in the conflict, and the so-called Tanker War emerged, intensifying the use of the strait and the issue of freedom of navigation as bargaining tools in the military confrontation between the parties to the war.[12]

Since then, Iranian leaders have repeatedly threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, although these threats have never been implemented in practice on a large scale. During the Iran-Iraq War, Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was then speaker of Parliament and the supreme leader's representative on the Supreme Defense Council, threatened in 1983 to close the strait, but no such action followed. The period witnessed what became known as the Tanker War, yet the confrontation did not escalate to the point of shutting down the waterway, as US naval forces escorted oil tankers and countered Iranian threats.

It can nevertheless be argued that the Strait of Hormuz has become a central component of Iran's strategy and defense doctrine, particularly following the intensification of US pressure and sanctions after the disclosure of Iran's nuclear program in 2002. Within the framework of its asymmetric confrontation with the United States and Israel, Iran has sought to accumulate additional sources of leverage. In response to international sanctions imposed on Iran in 2011, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad threatened to close the strait.[13]

In practice, Iran did not disrupt navigation through the Strait of Hormuz during this period. Instead, it adopted an asymmetric approach to restricting maritime traffic, including the detention and inspection of vessels as part of a strategy of bargaining and reciprocal pressure. At the same time, it continued to prepare its forces and capabilities to control the strait if circumstances required. Over time, the Strait of Hormuz assumed a central place in the doctrine of the

Iranian naval forces. In this context, Iran developed a range of more flexible and less costly capabilities, including drones, short-range missiles, unmanned boats and other means designed to influence navigation in the Gulf and through the Strait of Hormuz, alongside more traditional tools such as naval mines.(14)

The Strait of Hormuz arguably assumed greater prominence in Iranian policy following the United States' withdrawal from the nuclear agreement in May 2018. Iran warned that it could close the strait to oil exports if the United States sought to prevent Iranian oil from being exported through the waterway. Given that Iran's oil and gas reserves, as well as its principal ports, are located along the Arabian Gulf, the strait is of vital importance to the country's economy and political stability. As a result, the escalation of US pressure — particularly over the nuclear issue and the accompanying intensification of sanctions — placed the Strait of Hormuz at the center of the confrontation between Tehran and Washington. In 2018, after US President Donald Trump threatened to reduce Iranian oil exports to zero, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stated, "The Americans claim they want to completely stop Iranian oil exports... It is meaningless to say that if you stop Iranian oil exports, no oil will be exported from the region. If you can, try it and see the results."(15)

On the ground, throughout decades of crises and confrontations, Iran's threats have never progressed to the point of closing the Strait of Hormuz, largely out of concern over the prospect of entering into an unpredictable confrontation with the United States and the broader international community. Nevertheless, a number of actions attributed to Iran have demonstrated its ability to use the strait as a tool of pressure and influence. These actions included the harassment of vessels transiting the waterway, the targeting of certain ships and tankers in the Gulf, the seizure of some vessels and the escalation of the so-called Tanker War between Iran and Israel. At the same time, this approach created a dilemma for Iran. The significance of the Strait of Hormuz extends beyond its role as a bargaining tool in the confrontation between Tehran and Washington. The strait is also a vital artery for the global energy market and for the Gulf states, whose oil exports constitute the principal source of national income and the main driver of investment and development projects.

As a result, from the 1980s until the outbreak of the most recent war, Iran faced a strong regional and international response. A number of alliances were established to protect navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and ensure the continued flow of oil exports, including the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). Key participants in the IMSC included the UK, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Australia and Bahrain. France also led a number of European countries — including Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands and Portugal — in efforts to contribute warships to help secure the strait. In addition, countries such as Japan, South Korea, Russia and China independently participated in efforts to safeguard freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz by deploying naval vessels in the Gulf. Russia and China, however, approached

the issue of protecting navigation in the Gulf from a perspective that differed from that of the United States and other Western powers. This difference reflected broader international competition and the struggle for influence in the region.[16]

Iran and Oman did not particularly welcome US and Western initiatives, viewing them as a challenge to their influence over the Strait of Hormuz. In addition, the operational theater of these alliances lay within their territorial waters, which could generate tensions and the risk of unintended escalation at any time. The two countries also considered that such measures restricted their right to supervise the strait in accordance with UNCLOS, and undermined the rules and regulations they had endorsed under this framework to protect their sovereignty and adjacent territorial waters. For this reason, Iran proposed the Hormuz Security Initiative as an alternative regional framework to ensure the security of navigation through the strait during the 74th session of the UN General Assembly in 2019. However, the initiative did not gain traction, in light of Iran's adversarial regional posture and the strained nature of its relations with the Gulf states.[17]

In the same context, it is worth noting the US efforts to form a regional security alliance in the Gulf, specifically aimed at protecting navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, and, in contrast, joint Russian-Chinese-Iranian naval maneuvers were held periodically in the northern Indian Ocean region from the beginning of 2016 until the beginning of 2026. These developments reflect the reality of international competition and the increasing militarization around the strait, and demonstrate that the strait, as a strategic chokepoint, is gaining increasing importance in the calculation of major powers, particularly within the anti-hegemonic axis led by Russia and China, within which Iran seeks to position itself.[18]

Regional security is adhesively reliant on the strait. During periods of de-escalation, Iranian threats concerning the Strait of Hormuz declined, as witnessed following the Gulf–Iran rapprochement achieved through the 2023 Beijing Agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and earlier in 2021 following the Biden administration's retreat from Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign. Consequently, incidents involving the targeting of ships and tankers in the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman decreased.

However, with Trump's return to the White House in 2025 and the launch of direct military operations against Iran in June 2025, followed by another phase in February 2026, the Strait of Hormuz again moved to the forefront as a tool of influence and deterrence. Iran accordingly sought to transform it into a durable tool of power to reinforce regime survival, as part of broader changes in its military doctrine toward an offensive rather than defensive posture.[19]

Thus, it can be said that the "Strait of Hormuz card" did not emerge suddenly in Iran's regional policy, but rather developed gradually within the context of Iran's conflicts in the Gulf and to counter the US presence in the region. Tehran views the US presence near the Strait of Hormuz as an effort to assert hegemony, deter Iran and deny it any influence over this strategic passage. At the same time, Iran has remained cautious not to disrupt navigation through the strait within

the framework of a calculated confrontation strategy. However, this option is inevitable considering the asymmetrical and existential nature of the conflict that Iran is engaged in.

Hormuz in Iran's Post-War Strategy

With the outbreak of US-Israel attacks on Iran, Tehran placed significant emphasis on the Strait of Hormuz as a strategic card for deterrence and sought to leverage the new reality to pursue a more sustainable shift in the strait's status.

War Rhetoric and Employing Hormuz as a Tool of Deterrence

During the first week of the war, Iran conveyed a clear message indicating its intention to block maritime traffic through the Strait of Hormuz. This message was repeated by political and military officials, including Brigadier General Ebrahim Jabari, advisor to the commander-in-chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), who declared readiness to confront any oil shipment passing through the strait and issued warnings to neighboring countries. He stated, "We will burn any ship that tries to cross the Strait of Hormuz. We will attack oil pipelines and will not allow a single drop of oil to leave the region."[20]

The first message from the new Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei reaffirmed the central role of Hormuz in Iran's defense strategy. He called for the use of all available resources to close the strait, making it the focal point of military action.[21] This also reflected the new supreme leader's strong intention to escalate the conflict from a regional confrontation into one with direct implications for the global economy, thereby increasing the costs of war for all parties involved.

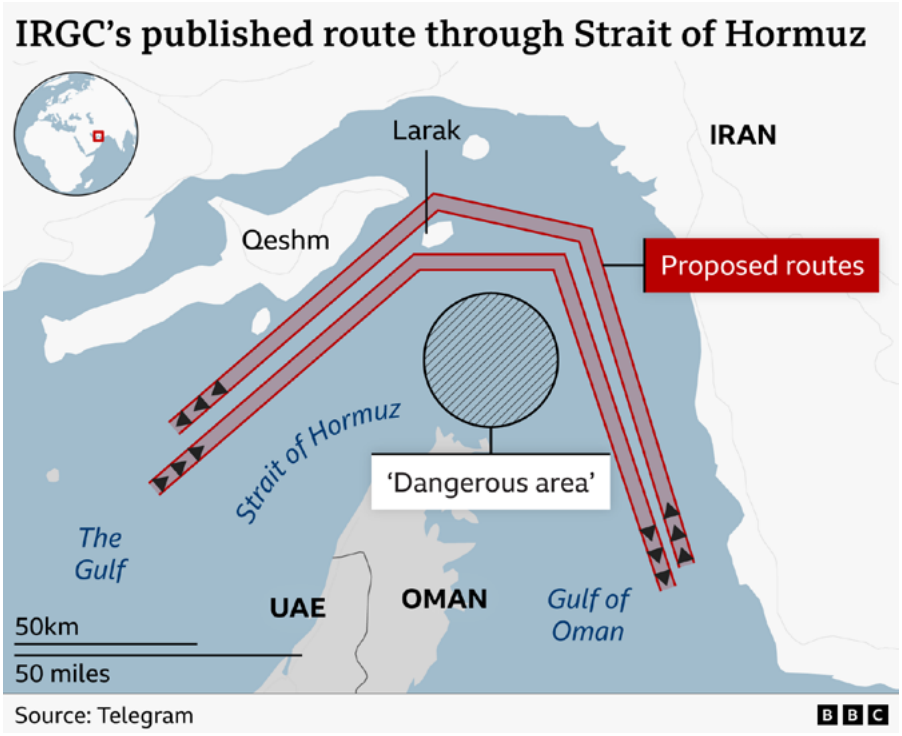
With the United States and Israel launching a military offensive aimed at regime change, Iran moved away from its established pattern of asymmetric warfare and calibrated escalation, resorting to all available means to ensure its survival. Among its most important assets in this context is the Strait of Hormuz. Although Iran did not formally close the strait, it required ships to coordinate and comply with its monitoring mechanisms for passage during both the conflict and ceasefire periods. It also fully prohibited the passage of vessels affiliated with the United States and Israel. Iran holds a strategic advantage under this policy, as the approximately 1,600-kilometer northern coastline of the strait along Iranian territory provides multiple opportunities for projecting military power. These include the deployment of troops, the laying of naval mines, the use of coastal missile systems and the operation of fast-attack craft, all of which grant Iran an operational edge in the area. Accordingly, the Strait of Hormuz is not merely a transit route but also a potential tool for power projection and deterrence. Iran does not require complex combat operations to disrupt traffic through the strait; even the threat of disruption significantly affects maritime movement. Iran did not explicitly announce the closure of the strait but instead relied on what it considers internationally recognized rights and naval warfare rules, including its interpretation of the violation of the right of innocent passage, to regulate and

scrutinize transit with the aim of constraining navigation. In this context, the IRGC published a map identifying dangerous and safe zones, encouraging ships to pass closer to the Iranian mainland near Larak Island — a route reportedly used by some vessels during the war, enhancing Iran's ability to control movement through the strait (see Map 2).[22]

To achieve its objective, Iran employed asymmetric warfare tactics, including drones, unmanned vessels and naval mines. Iran is known to possess a range of weapons capable of threatening maritime traffic in the Strait of Hormuz, most notably attack drones such as the long-range Arash-2 and the Shahed-101, which can carry out precision strikes against ships.

These systems, along with anti-ship ballistic missiles, fast-attack-craft and unmanned boats, provide Tehran with strategic leverage over one of the world's most important waterways. Experts assess that the extensive use of these capabilities could disrupt global trade through the strait, which carries approximately one-third of the world's oil supply.[23]

Map 2: The IRGC's Authorized Route Through the Strait of Hormuz



Altering the Legal Basis and Imposing a New Post-War Reality

It is understood that dealing with the Strait of Hormuz during wartime differs from its management in peacetime. National security threats may override

established rules and norms, and international law provides states with the right to restrict and monitor passage under conditions of threat. However, it appears that Iran, which is not a signatory to UNCLOS, seeks to use the war as an opportunity to fundamentally and sustainably alter the legal framework governing the strait.

Iran maintains that the Strait of Hormuz is shared between Iran and Oman, and is not an international waterway in the sense of open international waters, while affirming that all states have the right of innocent passage in peacetime. At the same time, Iran interprets this right in a more restrictive manner due to its non-ratification of UNCLOS, and consequently considers itself legally free to act in this regard. In this context, Iran seeks to exploit the war to impose a new legal and strategic reality in the strait that would enhance its influence.

Accordingly, during the war, some voices affiliated with the establishment put forward six main conditions for ending the conflict, including the imposition of a new legal regime for the Strait of Hormuz.(24)

Moreover, Tehran appears to be seeking to transform this control into a lasting gain. This is reflected in a memorandum Iran submitted to the Security Council and the IMO, in which it stated that non-hostile vessels could transit the Strait of Hormuz provided they coordinate with the Iranian authorities.(25) Iran also included, as part of its proposals for a ceasefire and the initiation of negotiations with the United States, its claimed right to manage the strait and the IRGC's oversight of transit through the waterway.(26)

In addition, Iranian officials have advanced proposals to impose transit fees on passage through the Strait of Hormuz of up to 10%. In this context, the head of the Joint Iran-Iraq Chamber of Commerce estimated that such fees could generate annual revenues for Iran of between $70 billion and $80 billion. The Iranian government has sought to translate this ambition into practice by moving toward the institutionalization of financial charges in exchange for safe passage through the strait and by leveraging its coercive control over Hormuz to impose a new economic reality on both regional states and the broader international community.(27)

In this context, the Iranian Parliament considered a draft measure titled "the Strategic Action Law for Peace and Sustainable Development in the Gulf Region." The proposal contains several key provisions relating to the Strait of Hormuz, including security arrangements in the strait, maritime navigation security, financial arrangements and toll systems denominated in rials, restrictions on passage by the United States and Israel, the exercise of Iran's sovereign role and that of its armed forces, cooperation with Oman within the legal framework governing the strait, and the prevention of transit by countries participating in unilateral sanctions against Iran. Although the National Security Committee of the Iranian Parliament approved the draft measure, it has not yet been submitted to the full Parliament for a vote. According to the proposal's proponents, it could be reintroduced for parliamentary consideration in the event of a renewed war or any future confrontation.(28)

According to reports, Iran has already tested a system for transit through the Strait of Hormuz under which ship operators are required to contact the IRGC through an affiliated intermediary company. As part of this process, operators provide information on vessel ownership, the state's flag, cargo, destination, crew list and automatic identification system (AIS) data. The IRGC then conducts a security review to assess whether the vessel has any connection to the United States, Israel or any party considered a threat to Iran. If the vessel passes this review, negotiations begin over the applicable transit fees. According to reports, the level of fees varies depending on the nature of Iran's relationship with the country involved, with friendly states receiving more favorable terms. The fees are reportedly paid in Chinese yuan or stable cryptocurrencies, and the cost of transit for large oil tankers can reach $2 million per vessel. Following approval, the ship receives a transit permit and a designated route. As it approaches the Strait of Hormuz, the route is reviewed through wireless communications, after which the vessel is escorted by an IRGC patrol along the specified passage.[29]

In an effort to avoid the appearance of exercising exclusive control over the Strait of Hormuz and disregarding Oman's rights with respect to the waterway, Iran announced on April 5, 2026, that it was working with Oman to draft a protocol governing maritime transit through the strait. This move suggests that Iran sought to complete the legal framework underpinning its actions and to involve Oman in an arrangement that would support its efforts to exercise greater control over the Strait of Hormuz.[30]

The Outcomes of Employing Hormuz in the Conflict

Iran has tested its Hormuz strategy and continues to do so. While it has succeeded in leveraging the strait within the context of the conflict, creating important opportunities for itself, its approach also faces significant challenges.

Iranian Gains

Although Iran's policies conflict with established international rules and norms governing the management of straits, the current international order is undergoing significant upheaval and transformation. This is driven by the power-based policies increasingly pursued by major powers, which have challenged the effectiveness of the rules-based order previously championed by the United States. As a result, the effectiveness of international institutions and legal frameworks has also been diminished.

Iran is seeking to take advantage of this environment to impose a new reality in the Strait of Hormuz or to advance its own legal interpretation of the right to manage and control the waterway. It is encouraged in this effort by the convergence of major-power interests around this vital passage, which occupies an important place in the global balance of power. This was reflected in the UN Security Council's inability to reach a decision on defending freedom of navigation in the strait, as well as in Russia and China's use of the veto against the resolution

condemning Iran or any resolution granting Iran the authorization to use force to guarantee freedom of navigation through the waterway.(31)

It can perhaps be argued that the Strait of Hormuz has become a tool through which competing powers seek to reshape not only regional balances, but also the broader structures of the global economy and international politics. A relatively sustained closure of the strait could contribute to the reconfiguration of economic, political and strategic equations, transforming it from a vital transit corridor into a significant factor in shaping the structure of the international system.

From Iran's perspective, this is consistent with its ideological vision and its aspiration for what it considers a more just international order, as well as with its longstanding objective of opposing hegemony and arrogance in accordance with its established ideological principles.

Internationally, it appears that Iran came under pressure to retreat from its position on closing the strait and obstructing navigation, and faced the possibility of the formation of an international coalition to protect maritime traffic through the waterway. In this context, the UK organized meetings and consultations to address the issue of ensuring the reopening of the Strait of Hormuz. According to the UK foreign secretary, foreign ministers and representatives from more than 40 countries met to discuss the urgent need to restore freedom of navigation for international shipping, and to demonstrate the strength of their determination to reopen the strait.(32)

In practice, however, European efforts remained fragmented and did not develop into a practical plan for intervening to protect freedom of navigation. This, in turn, encouraged Iran to continue its policy of closing the strait and using it as a bargaining tool. It was further reinforced by the fact that calls by Trump for several countries to deploy ships to secure navigation through the Strait of Hormuz did not receive a response, and no regional alliances emerged, unlike during his first term, when Iran had escalated attacks on shipping. This lack of response was partly due to the unwillingness of some actors, particularly European states, to participate in any military operation in which they had not been involved from the outset, as well as existing strains in the transatlantic relationship in light of Trump's criticism of European countries and NATO. Accordingly, the European position sent an implicit message to Trump regarding the difficulties his military approach could face in the absence of NATO coordination, and another message to Iran regarding the absence of transatlantic consensus — an environment that ultimately encouraged Tehran to proceed with its policy concerning the Strait of Hormuz.(33)

In addition, control of the Strait of Hormuz provides Iran with an influential tool in the course of the conflict, as any disruption of navigation through the strait — and any potential structural changes in its management —ultimately affect global energy security and trade. This is illustrated by the adverse impact of the closure of the strait on global energy markets: approximately 20% of global

oil flows, or around 20 million barrels per day, as well as 20% of global liquefied natural gas trade, were disrupted.

This had severe implications for the stability of the global economy, including a rise in oil prices to above $120 per barrel, nearly double their lowest levels in recent years. It was further expected that oil prices could reach $200 if the war continued. The closure of the strait also threatened the flow of approximately 20%–30% of materials required for fertilizers used in global food production. Overall, this situation had a significant impact on countries worldwide and on regional supply chains, while also increasing the cost of living in many states.(34)

While the closure of the Strait of Hormuz led to a multidimensional global crisis, with the security of the strait becoming a top priority for the world and the United States, Iran simultaneously secured a number of gains. Iranian oil exports rose by 37% after the Trump administration released previously detained Iranian oil and permitted the sale of additional quantities, under pressure from supply shortages and efforts to contain rapidly rising prices. Iran also benefited from higher oil prices, generating increased revenues. In addition, it engaged in bargaining with companies and states over facilitating the passage of its tankers, receiving fees in return.(35) On another level, the Iranian government received a series of calls from international and regional leaders, contributing to a partial break in its isolation, including interactions with France and other regional actors. This is reflected in statements by French President Emmanuel Macron, who noted that he had stressed in a call with the Iranian president the need to guarantee freedom of navigation by ending the closure of the Strait of Hormuz.(36)

Furthermore, Iran has used the Strait of Hormuz as a tool of pressure within its deterrence strategy, imposing significant costs on adversaries and the international community in an effort to recalibrate the balance of power at both the regional and global levels. To a considerable extent, it has transformed the strait from a purely economic waterway into a central factor in power politics.

Despite the United States imposing a military embargo on Iran, Tehran still retains a geographical advantage that enables it to continue exerting influence over the strait. This influence may persist even in peacetime, as shipping and insurance companies remain reluctant to assume risks in the absence of strong guarantees.(37)

Thus, the Strait of Hormuz has emerged as Tehran's strongest bargaining chip against the United States, which, for its part, failed to fulfill its pledge to secure the strait unilaterally. The US president spoke of ensuring freedom of navigation by having US warships escort tankers, and Washington even considered reopening the strait by force, but this did not materialize. Trump's threats of retaliation, including strikes against energy facilities if the Strait of Hormuz was not opened to navigation, also proved ineffective. The Iranians persisted in using this lever, given its demonstrated effectiveness as an asymmetric deterrent in what they consider a decisive war with the United States and Israel. They succeeded in placing the issue of the strait and its management among the terms of the ceasefire

agreement, and possibly even as a central condition. As Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi stated after the agreement, "Safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz will be possible in coordination with the Iranian armed forces, taking into account technical restrictions."[38] Subsequent developments following the announcement of the agreement, including Iran linking compliance in the Hormuz issue to ending the war in Lebanon, lifting US sanctions, stopping the siege before entering into negotiations on the nuclear issue, suggest that the Strait of Hormuz remains the key bargaining tool which Iran continues to rely on in this conflict.

Thus, Iran's use of the Strait of Hormuz as leverage has significantly impacted the course of the conflict, disrupting US calculations and prompting global and regional powers to pressure Washington to end the war. Even the United States was affected by the consequences of the suspension of navigation through the strait. Ultimately, the strait has become Iran's primary bargaining chip in negotiating an end to the war, as reflected in the ceasefire agreement brokered by Pakistan and other regional actors between the United States and Iran.

Accordingly, the Strait of Hormuz has been transformed into a strategic asset for Iran in its conflict with the United States, despite the imbalance in military power. It can be argued that the "Hormuz card" helped protect the establishment from potential collapse under the pressure of US-Israeli military strikes. This raises the question of whether Iran's ambitions regarding the strait were limited to wartime, or whether they extend further toward transforming it into a sustainable strategic asset.

It can also be suggested that without the "Hormuz card," Iran would have been in a far more precarious strategic position and the establishment would have faced existential challenges. Moreover, the victory narrative promoted by the supreme leader and his officials may have been inadvertently reinforced by the United States and Israel given Iran's assertion of control over the strait and the shock it inflicted on the global economy — framing steadfastness and survival as a form of victory, despite significant losses and the difficult future the establishment is likely to face.[39]

Legal Obstacles and Systemic Challenges

Although Iran has rediscovered the Strait of Hormuz as a powerful deterrent in an asymmetric war that has threatened the survival of the establishment, a number of challenges continue to hinder its efforts. The first of these challenges is legal in nature. According to UNCLOS, Iran's obstruction of passage through the Strait of Hormuz constitutes a clear violation of the principle of freedom of navigation.

Under the provisions of this convention, international straits such as the Strait of Hormuz are governed by the regime of transit passage, which guarantees freedom of navigation. This regime grants coastal states only limited monitoring powers and obliges them not to impede the passage of ships and aircraft through international straits. This stands in contrast to the narrower concept of innocent passage invoked by Iran, as outlined in the 1958 Geneva Convention.

Given the balance of power, it appears difficult for Iran to challenge international rules or establish a new legal status governing passage through the Strait of Hormuz, particularly in peacetime. Such a shift would create a complex legal environment and establish a precedent that could be replicated elsewhere, potentially turning international straits into zones of recurring conflict. This, in turn, would further complicate the security landscape and disrupt international trade.

It is unlikely that regional and international powers would accept such an outcome. The issue could once again be brought before the UN Security Council, and relevant international actors and organizations, including the World Trade Organization, and specialized energy institutions, may intervene. It also appears improbable that any state or party, including China and Russia — despite their alignment with Iran — would agree to grant control over the strait.[40]

The Strait of Hormuz, in particular, holds a special status, as it lies at the center of global power interests and plays a prominent role in influencing the global economy, the balance of power among major powers and their vital interests, as well as the regional and global balance of power. Accordingly, any change to the status of the strait directly conflicts with the global power structure and the network of interests, especially for the United States, which views the contest over the strait as significant in terms of its global hegemony and leadership, therefore a confrontation from which it cannot withdraw.

While China has indirectly benefited through Iran challenging Washington — prompting the United States to reduce the deployment of forces and vessels stationed in Southeast Asia, and even facilitating the collection of transit fees in Chinese yuan — these developments appear temporary and symbolic, with no structural impact on the global system of trade and power. China initially tolerated Iran's use of the Strait of Hormuz as a bargaining chip, but it may not accept any alteration to its legal status in the future.

The security of the strait, freedom of navigation and the uninterrupted flow of oil are vital to the Chinese economy, essential for its international trade and important for its strategic companies operating in the Gulf. The same applies to Russia, which is affected both positively and negatively by fluctuations in global energy markets. Both countries maintain balanced relations between Iran and the Gulf states and are unlikely to support any arrangement that would lead to the loss of key partners such as the Gulf states.

This assessment also extends to European countries, India and other powers dependent on Gulf oil and concerned with regional security and stability. These countries want to safeguard their investments and prevent further instability and chaos in the region, thereby reducing the risk of terrorism, violence and irregular migration.

The war has demonstrated Tehran's ability to disrupt up to 20% of global oil supplies, which the International Energy Agency described as "the largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market."[41] This, in turn, has left Iran more isolated than ever before. The extent of the damage that disruptions to

trade through the Strait of Hormuz could inflict on countries worldwide is evident, beginning with Asian powers, which are among the most affected.

China imports approximately 40%–50% of its oil needs through the strait, India around 75%, Japan between 90%–95%, South Korea around 70%, Thailand between 60%–65%, and Pakistan between 60%–70%. Europe also relies on Gulf oil to varying degrees, ranking second only to Asia in terms of exposure. Greece leads with dependence ranging from 25%–35%, followed by France at approximately 10%–20%, Italy at around 20%, Poland at 15% and Germany at 5%–10%. The strait is likewise significant for countries in the Americas and Africa.(42)

While most of these states, whose interests are closely tied to the security of the Strait of Hormuz, have rejected the US request to participate in protecting freedom of navigation through the waterway, they may nevertheless set aside their reservations — particularly those related to opposing Trump and his perceived unfriendly policies. They could either join Washington's approach to securing navigation through the strait or pursue independent measures to protect their interests, whether through collective cooperation or unilateral action.

In any case, these countries are determined not to allow the United States to reshape the situation in Hormuz and the broader region in a way that disregards their interests, especially after Washington imposed a naval blockade on Iran and began exerting control over passage through the strait.(43)

International and regional powers may in the future limit Iran's ability to use the Strait of Hormuz as a bargaining chip. The United States is likely to be better prepared for any future confrontation, taking measures to restrict Iran's freedom of movement and its capacity to influence maritime traffic. This readiness for worst-case scenarios would not be confined to the United States and its allies, but could also extend to consumers of vital goods passing through the strait, including hydrocarbons, essential commodities and food supplies.

Similarly, Iran, which had hoped to overcome its pre-war isolation through the Gulf gateway, may find itself, following its actions in Hormuz and its attacks on Gulf states, facing greater regional isolation and potentially future confrontation. This is because its approach to Hormuz is not an issue that the Gulf states can easily tolerate. As a result, these countries may deploy all available capabilities, mobilize their alliances and use their leverage to deprive Iran of such control, turning Hormuz from a potential area of cooperation into a security instrument in managing their disputes.

Even Oman, which Iran has sought to engage to establish a new framework regarding the strait, may see limited benefit in closer cooperation, given that Muscat's foreign policy and regional and international positioning are based on balance and neutrality — an approach that could be undermined by alignment with Iran's policies on Hormuz.

The closure of the Strait of Hormuz has provided Tehran with unexpected financial gains by enabling it to sell oil. However, this Iranian strategy is not viable in the long term as the naval blockade currently pursued by Trump could evolve

into a more stringent policy, cutting Iran off from vital revenues and further weakening the establishment domestically.

This, in turn, could limit Iran's long-term capacity to withstand and respond to external pressure, particularly given Washington's apparent willingness to impose a prolonged blockade. Iranian revenues are expected to decline sharply, while the country would be unable to import essential goods. The economic losses could reach an estimated $276 million per day due to reduced exports, alongside a $159 million daily shortfall in imports — amounting to a total of $435 million in daily losses, or approximately $13 billion per month.

In addition, the value of the Iranian rial could deteriorate significantly, while alternative export routes outside the Strait of Hormuz are estimated to account for less than 10% of current capacity. Under these conditions, it would become practically impossible for Iran to sustain its strategy of economic resistance.[44]

The policy of imposing mandatory transit fees and designated routes on ships may face significant challenges, as in peacetime customary international law and treaties — including UNCLOS, to which Oman is a party — do not provide for the imposition of excessive transit fees in straits. Although Iran has sought to coordinate with Oman to strengthen its position, the Omani minister of transport, following a meeting with the Iranian deputy foreign minister, publicly expressed opposition to the imposition of such fees. Accordingly, Iran may be unable to establish a new reality governing the Strait of Hormuz.

In addition, sanctions could be imposed on Iranian ports if the strait remains closed, further deepening the challenges facing the Iranian state, undermining internal stability, and potentially affecting the establishment's legitimacy and cohesion.

In summary, the establishment of a new legal regime for the Strait of Hormuz, or the imposition of a new reality such as transit fees, lacks legal legitimacy and cannot be achieved through coercion or force, particularly as the expected financial losses from such an approach would outweigh any potential revenue gains. Iran is in urgent need of de-escalating ongoing military and security tensions, lifting UN Security Council sanctions and building new international relations based on cooperation. It is therefore unlikely to benefit from restricting navigation in the Strait of Hormuz or imposing a fait accompli that would further compound its existing challenges.

Conclusion

The Iranian establishment is facing a decisive confrontation against the United States and Israel, compelling it to shift its military doctrine from defense to offense. Within this transformation, the Strait of Hormuz has emerged as its most important strategic card. The turbulence affecting the international system, the escalating competition among major powers, the intersection of competing interests in the Middle East and the high collective cost of closing the strait have all reinforced the significance and impact of this lever.

Although Iran has achieved notable gains through its control over navigation in the Strait of Hormuz — most importantly by acquiring a deterrent that helped prevent a war threatening the establishment's survival, and by securing a bargaining chip capable of moderating the US position and facilitating an agreement that preserves the establishment's image and ensures its continuity — it may still be unable to overcome legal complexities or impose a new reality on the strait in the future, or transform it into a sustainable Iranian asset.

This is due to the imbalance of power with the United States, which views freedom of navigation in the strait as central to its international standing, and which Trump, in particular, sees as having implications for his political future. Moreover, Iran may face consequences for seeking to impose a new reality that contradicts established international rules and harms the global economy as well as the interests of numerous international and regional actors, including the Gulf states, which are unlikely to accept such an outcome, as well as Iran's allies, who are themselves affected by disruptions to international trade through the strait, most notably China — especially after the adverse impact on global security and the economy, along with the risk of future shocks.

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Received	Accepted	Published
December 2, 2025	April 20, 2026	June 17, 2026

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.[1]

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."[2]

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.[3] Cyrus' capture of Babylon in 539 BCE symbolized this universal authority, later celebrated by Xenophon in the *Cyropaedia*.[4]

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.[5] This imperial ideal produced the "Pax Persia," an integrative system in which local elites were incorporated into Persian governance, fostering stability across vast territories.[6]

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.[7] 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.[8] 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.[9] 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.[10]

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.[11]

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.[12] 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.[13]

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.[14]

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.[15] 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.[16]

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.[17] However, the 1979 revolution brought an end to Iran's role as the policeman of the Gulf.[18]

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

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.[21] The Constitution also mandated "exporting the revolution," leading Iran to promote Islamist movements across Shiite and Sunni contexts.[22] 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."[23] After the 1987 Mecca incident, he declared, "We will export our experiences to the world… implementation of Islamic teaching among enslaved nations."[24]

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.[25] Iran also employed extraterritorial violence: by the mid-1990s, around 350 dissidents had been assassinated abroad, and the Rushdie fatwa exemplified its transnational reach.[26] 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.[27] Persian nationalism, with roots extending 2,500 years, has reinforced this dual identity. [28]

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."[29]

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%.[30] 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.[31] 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."[32] As Jeffrey Mankoff pointed out, Iran has consistently regarded Shiite populations beyond its borders as instruments of political leverage.[33]

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. [34]

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.[35] After Hamas seized Gaza in 2007, Iranian support reportedly reached $250 million annually.[36] 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.[37]

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.[38] 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." [39] 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."[40]

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.[41] 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.[42] 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. [43]

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.[44]

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.[45] Hezbollah, trained and armed by Iran, carried out the 1983 Beirut bombings that killed over 300 US and French soldiers.[46] 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."[47]

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.[48]

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.[49] 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. [50]

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."[51]

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

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.[54]

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" (Shayṭ ān-e Bozorg). Reconciliation between the two is seen as impossible. [55] 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."[56]

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."[57]

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.[58]

Before the revolution, President Carter had famously described Iran as an "island of stability."[59] 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.[60]

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."(61)

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."(62)

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. (63)

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 eembassy 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."[64]

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.[65]

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.[66] 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. [67]

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.[68]

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."[69]

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.[70]

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.[71]

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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Received	Accepted	Published
July 16, 2025	April 25, 2026	June 17, 2026

THE ORGANIZATIONAL FRAGMENTATION OF THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND ITS POSITION ON THE -12DAY WAR

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Abstract

This paper examines the internal divisions that have affected the Muslim Brotherhood since 2013 until 2025, focusing on the organizational fragility that emerged as a result. It explores the proliferation of competing centers of decision-making between the London and Istanbul factions, alongside the rise of a third bloc identified as the Current of Change. The paper also traces the development of relations between the Guidance Bureau in Egypt and the organization's branches across Arab countries since the 1970s. It highlights how the organization historically succeeded in maintaining unified political positions on major regional developments, including the Iranian revolution, the Gulf War, the 2006 Lebanon War and the 2011 Arab uprisings.

At the same time, the paper argues that the organization's current fragmentation has undermined its ability to coordinate unified positions, a reality reflected in the differing responses to the 12-Day War between Iran and Israel in June 2025. According to the paper, the London faction and Muslim Brotherhood branches in the Maghreb openly supported Iran, whereas the Syrian and Yemeni branches rejected that position, while the Istanbul faction remained silent. The paper concludes that these divisions reveal the effective breakdown of centralized decision-making within the organization, raising the possibility of the organization's gradual disintegration and the emergence of autonomous entities operating independently from the central leadership in Egypt.

Keywords: Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt, Arab uprising, 12-Day War, Islamist movements.

Introduction

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is among the world's largest Islamist movements and is transnational in nature. Since its establishment in 1928, it has served as a model of a transnational movement grounded in political and missionary discourse centered on the concept of the Ummah. As the organization expanded beyond Egypt, its leadership moved to create an overarching institutional structure known as the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood. The body was designed to coordinate among national branches and unify their political and missionary positions under the supervision of the Guidance Bureau in Egypt, regarded as the movement's highest authority.

This organizational centralization played a major role in shaping the MB's image as a transnational entity advancing a unified discourse on regional and international affairs. The movement's coordinated political positions became particularly evident during major developments such as the 1979 Iranian revolution, the 1990 Second Gulf War and the 2011 Arab uprisings. Yet this central structure gradually began to erode amid mounting internal disputes following the overthrow of the MB's rule in Egypt in 2013. The crisis ultimately led to the emergence of rival factions contesting the movement's leadership, most notably the London front and the Istanbul front, alongside a third faction known as the Current of Change (al-Taghyeer).

This division was not merely organizational in nature; it was also clearly reflected in the coherence of the group's decision-making process and its political positions on regional issues. Divergences among the organization's branches became evident in their responses to the 2025 Iran–Israel war, marking an unprecedented development in the movement's modern history. The paper found that some branches expressed support for Iran, while others adopted opposing positions, whereas certain factions within the group chose to remain silent. The significance of this paper therefore lies in examining how the MB's internal fragmentation has affected its ability to formulate a unified political stance.

The movement is consequently experiencing an unprecedented phase of internal fragmentation and leadership rivalry, embodied in the emergence of two competing factions contesting control of the organization: the London front led by Salah Abdel-Haq and the Istanbul front headed by Mahmoud Hussein. Alongside these factions, a third trend known as the Current of Change has emerged, rejecting both camps. These divisions have affected the structure of the international organization and weakened its ability to preserve a unified political position on regional and international issues. The central question that arises, therefore, concerns the extent to which the MB's internal divisions have undermined its capacity to formulate a unified political stance toward the Iran-Israel war in 2025. From this main question emerge several subsidiary inquiries, most notably: What is the nature of the organizational divisions within the MB? How have these divisions affected the centralization of political decision-making within

the movement? And what differences characterize the positions adopted by the organization's branches in the context of the 2025 Iran-Israel war?

To address these questions, the paper adopts a descriptive-analytical approach supported by historical analysis, tracing the evolution of the relationship between the Guidance Bureau and the national branches while examining declared political positions in light of the movement's internal divisions. The paper also employs a comparative approach in analyzing the differences between the positions adopted by various branches, with the aim of demonstrating the extent to which centralized decision-making within the organization has declined.

Background and Articulation of Positions on Arab and Islamic Issues

After the MB consolidated its foundations in Egypt, strengthened its presence during the early 1930s and gained broad popularity as a movement representing a significant segment of Egyptian society, it began expanding beyond the domestic sphere toward a wider framework of missionary and organizational activity. Hassan al-Banna established a special body known as the Section for Liaison with the Islamic World.

Among the department's principal tasks was establishing contact with religious figures and Islamic movements across the Muslim world to pave the way for the creation of branches affiliated with the group outside Egypt. The first external extension of the MB's call emerged in Djibouti in 1933.[1] However, this presence did not assume an official organizational form recognized by the movement's leadership. Rather, it remained limited to a number of individuals influenced by Banna's ideas during their studies in Egypt, who later transmitted those ideas to their local communities upon returning to their countries.

The first official branch of the MB established outside Egypt under the direct supervision of Banna was the Palestine branch, founded in 1935. Its establishment followed the dispatch of the movement's first delegation to several Islamic countries, which included Banna's brother, Abdulrahman al-Saati, alongside Muhammad Asad al-Hakim. During the visit, they met Muhammad Amin al-Husseini, the mufti of Jerusalem and head of the Supreme Islamic Council, who had reportedly been influenced by Banna's message during his studies in Egypt at Dar al-Da'wa wal-Irshad (the School of Advocacy and Guidance). The delegation subsequently promoted the MB's call in Palestine before traveling to Damascus, where they delivered sermons at the Umayyad Mosque concerning the movement's message and met a number of prominent Islamic figures there.[2]

The organization continued establishing affiliated organizations across Arab countries while dispatching members from Egypt to train new recruits in its principles and methodology. In this context, Banna sent Muhammad al-Hadi Atiya, a Sharia lawyer based in Suez, to the branch in Beirut, while Salah Abdel Hafez and Jamal al-Din al-Sanhuri were assigned to the branch in Sudan.[3] By 1937, the number of MB branches had reportedly risen to 18 distributed across 11 countries.[4]

Following the political transformation in Egypt during the early 1950s, and the ensuing direct confrontation between the Egyptian state and the MB, a large number of the movement's leaders left Egypt and went on to establish numerous social and missionary organizations in their host countries. This development contributed to strengthening the relationship between the MB's branches across the Arab world and the movement's Guidance Bureau by the late 1970s. Under the leadership of the Supreme Guide Omar al-Tilmisani, the Guidance Bureau consolidated its authority over MB organizations abroad following the announcement of the movement's General Regulations in the early 1980s. These bylaws called for the imposition of unity over all branches of the organization. The Guidance Bureau in Egypt began exercising direct authority over other branches, no longer acting solely as a moral reference point but increasingly as a centralized leadership structure with the power to approve or reject local supervisors.

One example of this authority was the approval by the Guidance Bureau in Egypt of Adnan Saad al-Din as general supervisor of the movement's branch in Syria during the late 1970s, following internal divisions within the Syrian branch. Adnan Saad al-Din later stated that the Guidance Bureau in Egypt had elected him amid disputes within the Syrian MB and the emergence of several competing factions, including the Fighting Vanguard, the Issam Al-Attar group and the Palestinian MB organization in Syria. He also noted that he traveled to Cairo to pledge allegiance to the organization's supreme guide before returning to Syria.[5]

Similarly, the Guidance Bureau in Egypt intervened in the early 1990s in the appointment of a general supervisor for the MB's branch in Jordan following the conclusion of the term of Abdulrahman Khalifa. Internal deliberations emerged regarding the selection of his successor, and the names of the proposed candidates were submitted to the Guidance Bureau in Egypt. Ultimately, Abdulmajeed Dhunaibat was chosen as general supervisor of the MB in Jordan.[6]

Mustafa Mashhour (the MB's fifth supreme guide)[7] played a significant role in structuring the relationship between the Egyptian MB and its leadership bodies in other countries. He acted as a key intermediary linking the organization's internal leadership in Egypt with its counterparts abroad.[8] One of the most prominent organizational priorities during this period was the effort to centralize decision-making on regional and international issues among the MB's branches in the Arab world. This was done to capitalize on political developments in service of the movement's ideological objectives. This was intended to help build a broader popular base for the organization and strengthen its overall influence.[9]

On May 10, 1978, a provisional bylaw by the Guidance Bureau, approved by Tilmisani, marked a significant development in the organizational and coordinative relations among the MB's branches across the Arab world. Under this bylaw, relations were formally regulated between the movement's Guidance Bureau in Egypt and its affiliated organizations.

Subsequently, on July 29, 1982, amendments were introduced to the provisional bylaw and circulated to all branches of the organization across the Arab and Is-

lamic worlds. The bylaw outlined the movement's principles and objectives, the conditions of membership and the rights and duties of members. It also defined the organizational structure, including mechanisms for selecting leaders and members of the General Shura Council. In addition, it clarified the relationship between the Guidance Bureau, headed by the supreme guide in Egypt, and MB leadership branches in other countries.[10]

The regulations reflected the clear intention of the MB's Guidance Bureau to structure and standardize the positions of the organization's branches across different countries regarding emerging regional and international issues. Article 43 of Chapter Five, governing the relationship between the General Command and regional leaderships, stipulated that regional bodies must adhere to the decisions of the General Command, represented by the supreme guide, the Guidance Bureau and the organization's Shura Council. This included compliance with the group's general policies and official positions on public affairs as determined by the central leadership structures, as well as the requirement to obtain the Guidance Bureau's approval prior to taking any significant political decision. The regulations further emphasized the necessity of consultation and agreement with the supreme guide or the Guidance Bureau before making decisions on local matters that could have implications for the organization in other countries.[11]

After the adoption of the MB's General Regulations in 1982, some figures within the organization across the Arab world began to express reservations regarding the subordination of the organization's branches to the Guidance Bureau in Egypt in both internal and external decision-making. Among the most prominent of these figures was Hassan al-Turabi, who advanced the view that the relationship between the branches and the Guidance Bureau should be based on coordination rather than absolute subordination, pending the fulfillment of conditions related to political empowerment.

Turabi justified this position by referring to the political achievements of the MB's branch in Sudan, particularly following the fall of the regime of Jaafar Nimeiri in 1985. He argued that unconditional allegiance and waiting for directives from the supreme guide in every matter was no longer appropriate in light of the Sudanese branch's growing political effectiveness. However, this proposal was met with strong rejection by the organization's leadership, which viewed it as a deviation from the principles of the MB's methodology and organizational framework.

During this period, the National Islamic Front, led by Turabi, emerged as a political force that took into account the specific political and social conditions of Sudanese society. In 1989, following the military coup led by the National Islamic Front alongside Omar al-Bashir, it became increasingly evident that Turabi was pursuing an Islamic political project that operated with a degree of independence from the MB. Consequently, Turabi was later expelled from the MB's organizational structure in Sudan.[12]

This position was later echoed by Rached Ghannouchi in the early 1990s, who emphasized the distinctiveness of Tunisian society in comparison with Egyptian society. Accordingly, he argued that the relationship between the organization's branch in Tunisia — represented by the Ennahda Movement — and the Guidance Bureau should be based on commitment, cooperation and coordination, rather than hierarchical subordination.[13]

MB's Position on the 1979 Iranian Revolution

The strengthening of relations between the MB's branches and the adoption of the General Regulations at the end of the 1970s coincided with a major regional development, namely the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979, which led to the overthrow of the monarchy under Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and its replacement with a political system based on the theory of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist.

In this context, the MB's Guidance Bureau translated the provisions and regulations of its general system —particularly those relating to the management of positions on contemporary issues — into practical action. The International Organization of the MB formed a delegation comprising representatives from various branches in Arab countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Saudi Arabia.[14] The delegation traveled to Iran to congratulate the leadership of the revolution on its success and to explore avenues of cooperation between the movement and the newly established revolutionary leadership.[15]

This visit was followed by another delegation from the MB's branch in Sudan, led by Turabi, which traveled to Iran and met with Ruhollah Khomeini to congratulate him on the success of the revolution.[16] In addition, Khomeini's photograph appeared on the cover of *Al-Da'wa* magazine, the main publication of the MB in Egypt, in its March 1979 issue, which was issued in the month following his rise to power in Iran.[17]

While Ghannouchi stated that, with the success of the Iranian revolution, Islam had entered a new civilizational epoch,[18] Fathi Yakan — secretary-general of the Islamic Group, the MB branch in Lebanon — praised the Iranian revolution, arguing that the intellectual and doctrinal foundations of the Islamic awakening were derived from three main schools: the school of Banna, the school of Sayyid Qutb and the school of Khomeini.[19]

MB's Position on the 1990 Second Gulf War

This consistency in the positions of the MB's branches regarding emerging regional and international developments extended even to major crises witnessed in the Arab and Islamic world in the contemporary period, including the Second Gulf War (the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq) and its subsequent developments and repercussions. During this period, the International Organization of the MB was able to coordinate and align the positions of the movement's various branches, producing a unified stance toward this major event, most notably the rejection of

seeking assistance from foreign forces for the liberation of Kuwait. This position was reportedly upheld even by branches located within the Gulf region. In Saudi Arabia, the local branch was described as taking a position that diverged from the official stance of the Saudi state and that of the Council of Senior Scholars. Likewise, the branch in Kuwait — despite the country being directly affected by the invasion — was characterized as adhering to the position of the International Organization of the MB, particularly its rejection of foreign military intervention to liberate Kuwait.[20]

MB's Position on the 2006 Israel-Lebanon War

At that time, the Supreme Guide of the MB Muhammad Mahdi Akef, adopted a position that diverged from several Arab states' stances on the 2006 Israel-Lebanon war. While a number of Arab governments viewed the actions of Hezbollah as uncoordinated with the Lebanese state and undertaken without consultation with them, Akef instead called for support for Hezbollah and its Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah in their confrontation against Israel. He also announced the movement's readiness to dispatch approximately 10,000 fighters to participate alongside Hezbollah in the conflict.[21]

The position expressed by the supreme guide of the MB in support of Hezbollah was subsequently reinforced by a statement titled "A Statement and Call from the Scholars of the Ummah,"[22] which was signed by a large number of MB figures from various branches of the organization across Arab countries,[23] aligning with the view of the supreme guide regarding the necessity of supporting Hezbollah in its war. In the same context, the Algerian Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) called on the Algerian public to participate in a march under the slogan "Rejecting Silence and Humiliation" in support of Hezbollah.[24]

These positions, taken together, underscore the perceived strength of the Guidance Bureau in shaping and unifying the stances of the MB's branches across different countries on regional and international issues.

MB's Position on the 2011 Arab Uprisings

Another example of coordination between the MB's branches and the Guidance Bureau on regional and international issues was their unified support for the uprisings that erupted across several Arab countries in 2011, alongside coordination among the movement's branches in pursuit of some of the organization's objectives. This pattern of alignment also continued following the fall of the MB's rule in Egypt in 2013. Branches of the organization across Arab countries issued statements expressing support for the group in Egypt and criticizing the developments that led to its removal from power.

The organization's branch in Jordan described the events in Egypt as a "heinous coup,[25]" while the General Supervisor of the MB in Syria Riad al-Shaqfa characterized the developments as dangerous and likely to generate significant instability, warning that a return to military rule would constitute a grave mis-

take.[26] The MB in Sudan described the events as a coup directed against Arab and Islamic political will and linked them to efforts aimed at preserving the Zionist regime in occupied Palestine through regional actors allied with Jews and Americans.[27]

Meanwhile, the Yemeni Islah Party organized a demonstration in the capital, Sana'a, condemning the developments in Egypt after the fall of the MB's rule.[28] The organization's branch in Iraq, represented by the Iraqi Islamic Party, issued a statement describing the events as a blatant coup against democracy, and an attempt to undermine what it called the blessed Egyptian revolution.[29] Likewise, the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia condemned the events, describing them as a clear coup against legitimacy.[30]

In a similar vein, Muhammad Reda Benkhaldoun, head of the international relations department of the Moroccan Justice and Development Party, stated that the events in Egypt constituted a military coup and an attack on legitimacy.[31] A number of individuals affiliated with the MB in Gulf countries also participated in statements condemning the events and describing them as a coup prohibited under Islamic law.[32]

The Fragmentation of the MB's Organizational Structure After the Coup in Egypt

The MB is currently undergoing an unprecedented phase of fragmentation and organizational weakness as a result of political and security pressures imposed on it in numerous Arab and Islamic countries, particularly in Egypt, where the movement's Guidance Bureau is headquartered. These circumstances have contributed to restricting organizational coordination between the Guidance Bureau in Egypt and the movement's branches abroad. At the same time, internal disputes emerged among members of the Guidance Bureau who left Egypt after the organization was designated a terrorist group and many of its leaders faced prosecution in Egyptian courts. These developments fragmented the movement into rival entities that engaged in internal power struggles, ultimately resulting in an open split between the London and Istanbul fronts. Each faction has sought to assert organizational, financial and administrative control over the movement. The London front is led by Abdel-Haq and includes figures such as Osama Suleiman, Media Spokesman Suhaib Abdel-Maqsoud, Mohi el-Din el-Zayt and Helmy el-Gazzar. The Istanbul front, meanwhile, is headed by former Secretary-General Hussein, whose council includes Hammam Youssef, Medhat el-Haddad, Ragab el-Banna, Mamdouh Mabrouk and Media Spokesman Talaat Fahmy.

The internal conflict within the MB became increasingly public after Ibrahim Munir assumed responsibility following the arrest of Mahmoud Ezzat by Egyptian security forces. Ezzat had served as acting supreme guide since the imprisonment of the movement's eighth Supreme Guide Mohamed Badie along with other MB leaders in August 2013. He continued to manage the organization's affairs in strict secrecy until his arrest in August 2020.

After assuming leadership of the organization, Munir issued several decisions, including the abolition of the organization's General Secretariat, based on his interpretation of Article 39 of the group's internal regulations, which provides for the position of secretary-general of the Guidance Bureau to coordinate among bureau members under normal circumstances. As a result, Hussein was removed from his official post within the organization. A further decision established an auxiliary committee to assist the deputy supreme guide, widening the divide between the competing factions. This tension was compounded by the fact that the Istanbul faction, led by Hussein, controlled the movement's financial resources, while the London faction retained influence over important organizational files through its ties with the International Organization of the MB.

As a result of the deepening disagreements and the failure to reach a mutually acceptable settlement, the rival factions agreed to hold internal elections in Istanbul to select the movement's leadership abroad. The elections resulted in the defeat of Hussein and his associates, who subsequently submitted 53 appeals challenging the results on grounds of alleged electoral fraud. However, the election committee rejected all of the appeals. Consequently, the defeated faction refused to acknowledge the outcome and declined to hand over the administrative files under its control. In response, the London faction referred Hussein and several of his associates — including Medhat el-Haddad, Hammam Youssef, Ragab el-Banna, Mamdouh Mabrouk and Mohamed Abdel Wahab — for investigation, citing the movement's internal regulations. The move followed the submission of a memorandum accusing these members of violating the organization's bylaws. The Istanbul faction subsequently convened a meeting in which it decided to remove Munir from his position, relying on internal regulations that prohibit individuals holding a nationality other than Egyptian from assuming the role of supreme guide or acting supreme guide. Munir held both Egyptian and UK citizenship.[33]

In November 2022, Munir, the acting supreme guide of the Muslim Brotherhood, died. Following his death, the London faction elected Abdel-Haq as the new acting supreme guide, succeeding Munir. This development reignited the struggle between the rival London and Istanbul factions competing for leadership of the organization.

Hussein and his associates refused to recognize Abdel-Haq's appointment, arguing that the MB possessed a General Shura Council composed of members from both inside and outside Egypt, and that this council had already selected Hussein as acting supreme guide while forming a new administrative body in December, 2022. They emphasized that the matter was an internal Egyptian organizational issue governed by the movement's own regulations and bylaws.[34]

The rivalry between the London and Istanbul factions also renewed attention toward a third trend within the MB known as the Current of Change. This current rejects the practices of both competing factions and is largely composed of younger members aligned with the late Mohamed Kamal, founder of the Sawa'ed

Misr Movement, also known as the Hasm Movement, who was killed during a confrontation with Egyptian security forces in 2016. Kamal had previously overseen the organization's specialized armed committees.

The Current of Change publicly announced its presence toward the end of 2022, expressing a desire to remove the older generation of leaders and replace them with new figures drawn from its own ranks. The current based its position on the claim that nearly 80% of the organization's administrative office members remained inside Egypt and were loyal to Kamal, giving the movement's younger generation the capacity to challenge and potentially bring down both the London and Istanbul factions. This current is led by Muhammad Montaser, alongside Yahya Moussa, Muhammad Elhami and Gamal Abdelsattar.

This current adopts violence as a means of change and has called for violent operations in Egypt aimed at overthrowing the regime and securing the release of its members from prison.[35] Meanwhile, the organizations affiliated with the International Organization of the MB have appeared unable to resolve the internal conflict affecting the parent organization in Egypt, particularly after the failure of four reconciliation initiatives between the two rival factions. These efforts collapsed amid each faction's insistence on demands that the opposing side viewed as attempts at marginalization and exclusion.[36]

Limits of Organizational Efficiency and Inconsistency Toward the Israel-Iran War

The intra-conflict within the MB over leadership positions, influence and financial control has affected the structure of the organization's international network and weakened the Guidance Bureau's authority over the movement's branches in different countries. The acting supreme guide is no longer able to impose the authority and symbolic weight of his office upon the leaders of the organization's branches abroad, nor has the Guidance Bureau remained capable of defining the principal policy orientations of these branches or coordinating their positions on regional and international conflicts.

As a result, the movement has lost one of its most significant instruments for building popular influence and mobilizing Arab and Islamic societies toward its objectives, namely the unification of political positions as a means of exerting pressure on existing governments.

The centralized decision-making process among the MB's branches in different countries — something the Guidance Bureau had long sought to institutionalize through regulations and bylaws — has gradually weakened and become largely ineffective. As a result, the movement is now experiencing a state of confusion and divergence in positions on major regional and international issues between the parent organization in Egypt and its regional branches. This fragmentation became particularly visible in the differing responses of MB-affiliated organizations to the 12-Day War between Iran and Israel.

On June 18, 2025, the London faction, led by acting Supreme Guide Abdel-Haq, issued a statement titled "A Message to the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran," declaring its full support for Iran in its confrontation with Israel. The statement, issued in the name of the acting supreme guide, opened by affirming, "On behalf of myself and the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), I would like to emphasize our full support for the Islamic Republic of Iran in the face of the brutal 'Israeli' aggression. I also would like to extend my sincere condolences for all the martyrs, including leaders, scholars, and innocent Iranian citizens."[37]

The same position was adopted by several branches of the MB across the Maghreb region, including the Justice and Development Party in Morocco,[38] the Ennahda Movement in Tunisia[39] and the Movement of Society for Peace in Algeria,[40] in addition to the organization's branches in Iraq, represented by the Iraqi Islamic Party, and in Lebanon, represented by the Islamic Group.[41] These groups publicly declared their support for Iran during the war, justifying their stance on the basis of the Palestinian cause, which they described as transcending all divisions and disagreements among Islamic peoples.

While the Syrian branch of the MB disavowed the statement issued by the London front which declared full support for Iran in its conflict with Israel, the Syrian MB issued its own statement on June 19, 2025.

In its statement, the Syrian branch declared that it disassociated itself from any statement issued in the name of the MB that supports "killers" or defends "criminals," adding that both sides of the conflict share projects aimed at altering the religion of nations and humiliating peoples. It further stated that the group in Syria maintains an equal distance from all projects of hegemony and influence that have contributed to the destruction of Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Lebanon, and rejects alignment with any party perceived as seeking to distort Islam or exploit it for political purposes.[42]

The organization's branch in Yemen, represented by the Yemeni Congregation for Reform Party, also reflected this position through articles and posts by its members published on the party's official website and on their social media accounts, without issuing a formal statement under the party's official name.[43]

While one faction in the leadership dispute within the MB — the Istanbul front led by former Secretary-General Hussein — remained silent regarding the Israel-Iran war, no clear or explicit position was issued by it or by its senior figures. The MB's official website is *ikhwanonline.com* and its representatives include Hussein, acting as supreme guide, along with Media Spokesman Fahmy, Ali Hamad, Hassan Saleh, Ahmed Assem and Iman Mahmoud. None issued any statement.[44] However, a review of the aforementioned website, as well as the personal social media accounts of members of the Istanbul front, shows no clearly articulated position on the Israel-Iran war. This silence appears notable, given that the organization has historically often taken early and prominent stances on major regional and international developments.

The MB's divergent positions on the Israel-Iran war have also been reflected in the positions of MB-linked actors in the Gulf region. It is difficult to speak of a cohesive, hierarchical organizational structure for the MB in the Gulf; rather, its presence is often described as resembling fragmented media outlets that lack a unified institutional framework.

The Arabian Gulf remains a sensitive sphere of influence that MB-affiliated branches or remnants are generally unable to confront openly, particularly after the noticeable decline of the movement's presence in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and to some extent Bahrain. The situation in Kuwait appears more distinctive through the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM, known by its Arabic acronym Hadas), commonly regarded as the political arm of the Kuwaiti MB.

Accordingly, its position — expressed in a brief, cautious and somewhat ambiguous statement — can be interpreted less as an ideological alignment with Iran but more as a political stance broadly consistent with the position attributed to the movement's central leadership in Cairo (often associated with the London–Istanbul divide). It reflects a form of alignment with an axis perceived as opposing Israel, while simultaneously maintaining caution and ambiguity to avoid direct confrontation with Gulf security concerns.

In contrast, Al-Menbar Islamic Society in Bahrain adopted a more critical stance toward Iran, particularly regarding its targeting of Gulf states. Overall, the MB's positions vary according to leadership configurations, temporal and spatial contexts and actors' political interests.

Conclusion

This paper examined the extent to which the Guidance Bureau in Egypt has, since the late 1970s, been able to impose a high degree of centralization over the MB's branches prior to the formulation of any political decision on regional or international issues. This centralization contributed to reinforcing the movement's image as a politically cohesive transnational organization. However, the fragmentation and internal disunity that later characterized the International Organization of the MB — particularly with the escalation of the leadership dispute between the London faction, led by Abdel-Haq, and the Istanbul faction, led by Hussein, as well as the emergence of the Current of Change, which advocates violence as a means of restoring the organization's prominence — has significantly weakened the ability of the parent leadership in Egypt to control the positions of affiliated branches on regional and international political issues. This weakening has, in turn, encouraged some branches to diverge from or openly challenge the political positions of the Guidance Bureau and the Shura Council. The result has been an unusual development within the structure of the International Organization of the MB, reflected in the emergence of clear contradictions in positions regarding the 12-Day War among MB-affiliated organizations. This situation may indicate a possible trajectory toward the disintegration of the international organizational framework and the emergence of more autonomous national structures that no longer recognize the centralized decision-making authority in Egypt.

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Received	Accepted	Published
December 23, 2025	April 30, 2026	June 17, 2026

EXAMINING IRAN'S PRESENCE IN AFRICA THROUGH A GLOBAL SOUTH LENS

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Abstract

This paper examines Iran's presence in Africa through a Global South lens, aiming to reframe it beyond dominant interpretive frameworks that situate it within the logic of geopolitical rivalry, ideological expansion or the binary of influence versus containment. The paper proceeds from the premise that understanding this presence does not depend solely on its quantitative scale or geographical reach, but also on the conceptual framework through which it is assessed, as well as the applicability of prevailing criteria of agency to contexts shaped by an unequal international structure.

The paper adopts an analytical-interpretive approach grounded in a critical review of the literature and the construction of a conceptual framework informed by global international relations (IR) theory and critiques of international political economy, with the aim of redefining the notions of presence and agency within the Global South context. It finds that Iran's presence is characterized by a selective and gradual pattern, shaped more by considerations of constraint management and partner diversification under sustained structural pressures than by any comprehensive expansionist project.

The paper further proposes redefining agency as a relative capacity to expand room for maneuver within an unequal international structure through adaptive and relational strategies. In doing so, it contributes to a broader discussion on how the roles of Global South actors in international relations should be analyzed by interrogating and redefining prevailing normative criteria in light of their structural positioning.

Keywords: Iranian presence in Africa, Global South, constrained agency, international political economy, strategic repositioning, critique of Western-centrism.

Introduction

In most of the literature, Iran's presence in Africa is approached through dominant Western interpretive frameworks that situate it within patterns of geopolitical competition, or within binary logics of threat and containment, or alternatively interpret it as an ideological extension of the 1979 Iranian revolution. While these approaches have contributed to the analysis of key dimensions of the phenomenon, they often begin from concepts of agency and power that were historically developed within Western experience and subsequently generalized as universal analytical standards. As a result, external presence is implicitly assessed in terms of its capacity to generate extended influence or reshape the international environment, without examining the suitability of this criterion for contexts operating under different structural conditions.

Within this context, the paper draws on Amitav Acharya's approach to "Global International Relations,"[1] which calls for moving beyond Western-centric theorization and reconstructing conceptual categories to incorporate non-Western experiences in defining power, agency and sources of international legitimacy. It also engages with Samir Amin's theory of "Unequal Development"[2] and his analysis of a state's position within the international political economy, to understand how structural positioning shapes strategic room for maneuver and informs foreign policy tools and priorities.

The paper is grounded in the central premise that understanding Iran's presence in Africa is not determined solely by its scale or geographical reach, but also by the conceptual framework through which this presence is assessed. Reframing it from a Global South perspective allows it to be understood as a form of agency emerging within an unequal international structure, in which a state's options, instruments and constraints are redefined in light of its position within the international system.

From this perspective, the paper's central question is: How does the Global South perspective contribute to reinterpreting Iran's presence in Africa in terms of its motivations, instruments and limits of agency?

This question branches into several sub-questions: first, those concerning the limitations of prevailing interpretive frameworks and their implicit assumptions; second, those relating to the redefinition of the concepts of presence and agency within an unequal international context; and third, the analysis of the determinants of Iranian foreign policy and its patterns of engagement in Africa.

Methodologically, the paper adopts an analytical-interpretive approach based on a critical review of the literature aimed at identifying dominant interpretive patterns and their conceptual limitations. It then develops a conceptual framework grounded in a Global South perspective, which is subsequently applied in a contextual analysis linking the determinants of Iranian foreign policy to the broader international environment. In addition, it relies on a qualitative analysis of economic and diplomatic data pertaining to Iran-Africa relations, distinguishing between official discourse, institutional decision-making mechanisms and

actual practices. This enables a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon across its multiple dimensions, without reducing it to a single quantitative indicator or a purely security-based reading.

Accordingly, the paper is structured into three main sections. The first addresses the prevailing interpretive frameworks of Iran's presence in Africa, examining their theoretical premises and limitations. The second is devoted to constructing a conceptual framework from a Global South perspective. The third shifts to the applied level, where Iran's presence in Africa is analyzed in light of the determinants of foreign policy and its actual patterns of engagement. The paper concludes with a discussion of the key theoretical and methodological findings that emerge from the analysis, as well as the research directions they open for future inquiry.

Iran's Presence in Africa — Prevailing Interpretive Frameworks

Existing literature has addressed Iran's presence in Africa through a range of approaches, most of which reflect prevailing paradigms in international relations, particularly classical realism and neorealism, foreign policy analysis grounded in institutional perspectives, as well as readings informed by South–South discourse that do not necessarily interrogate its underlying epistemological assumptions. A review of this scholarship shows a general tendency to interpret Iran's presence primarily through the logics of geopolitical competition, ideological expansion or strategic repositioning, with only limited analytical attention devoted to rethinking this presence from a Global South perspective.

Within the geopolitical framework, Iran's presence is situated in what the literature describes as the "new scramble for Africa," in which the continent is conceptualized as a space for the redistribution of influence among emerging global and regional powers. Studies on geopolitical transformation in Africa have reinforced this view, arguing that the growing role of actors such as China, Russia and Türkiye has reshaped the continent's competitive landscape, turning it into an arena for the strategic repositioning of midlevel and emerging powers.[3] In this context, Iran is classified as a middle power seeking to expand its influence in specific regions, particularly East Africa and the Horn of Africa, thereby positioning itself within a network of overlapping competitive interactions.

However, while this interpretation highlights the competitive dimension, it implicitly assumes the existence of a coherent expansionist capacity and treats the Iranian case as an extension of the behavioral patterns of other rising powers, without sufficiently accounting for the distinctive nature of Iran's position within the international system.

In a second approach, Iran's presence in Africa is understood as an extension of an ideological discourse established since the 1979 Iranian revolution. This discourse is grounded in anti-hegemonic rhetoric and the construction of South–South relations. From this perspective, Tehran's engagement with the continent is seen as a continuation of the revolutionary dimension of its foreign policy, with

Africa viewed as a suitable arena for activating narratives of resistance to imperialism and for building relations with non-aligned and post-colonial states.[4]

However, this interpretation is challenged by the empirical reality that the declared discourse on Africa has not always been accompanied by a coherent implementation strategy. Rather, at different stages, it has taken on an ad hoc character, shaped by economic pressures, sanctions and efforts to reinvigorate diplomatic engagement. Consequently, reducing Iran's presence to a fixed ideological dimension obscures the gap between rhetoric and practice and overlooks the evolving nature of Iran's foreign policy priorities.

Within the framework of foreign policy analysis, some of the literature focuses on Iran's decision-making processes as an entry point for interpreting its foreign behavior. These studies suggest that institutional interactions are managed within a hierarchical system overseen by the top leadership, producing a degree of coordination in strategic decisions.[5] From this perspective, foreign policy actions are not reduced to a rivalry between the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the civilian government, but are instead understood as the outcome of a network of institutional interactions in which regime consensus is continuously reshaped.

While this approach is important for unpacking internal structures, it remains primarily focused on domestic decision-making dynamics. It does not sufficiently incorporate Iran's position within the international system, nor the structural constraints that shape its options in external contexts beyond its immediate regional environment, such as Africa.

This intersects with the "strategic partnerships" approach, which views the engagement of non-Western powers in Africa as part of a broader reconfiguration of the international order toward greater multilateralism. In this framework, such partnerships are generally understood as flexible and selective arrangements, shaped by the capabilities of the actors involved and by local contextual considerations, rather than as deep institutional alliances or long-term economic integration.

Within this perspective, Iran–Africa relations are situated within the pattern of middle-power engagement on the continent. However, the framing of Africa as a strategic arena in official discourse has not consistently translated into a coherent operational strategy or a sustained economic presence.[6]

These trends indicate that the existing literature, despite its diversity, tends to analyze Iran's presence in Africa through lenses of influence and balancing, or through the dichotomy of ideology versus interest or via internal decision-making dynamics, without adequately interrogating the underlying criterion of agency itself.

In this context, reviewing these dominant frameworks is not intended to dismiss the explanatory value of security, ideological or institutional approaches, but rather to expose their analytical limitations when detached from their broader structural context. Iran's presence in Africa, as reflected in the literature,

cannot be fully understood if it remains confined to the dichotomy of threat versus influence or reduced to a discourse of abstract solidarity. Instead, it calls for a reframing that begins from the actor's position within an unequal international structure and from the nature of the agency available to Global South states under enduring constraints.

The Global South Perspective and Reconstructing the Concept of Presence

The Global South perspective starts from the premise that the international system is structured around inequality, in which resources, opportunities and constraints are distributed unevenly, and that many core concepts in international relations were historically formulated within the context of Western experience before being generalized as universal analytical standards. In this context, Acharya calls for moving beyond Western-centric theorizing through a "Global International Relations" approach, emphasizing that incorporating non-Western experiences is not simply a matter of expanding geographical representation, but of reconstructing the concepts themselves so that they are no longer shaped by Western experience in defining power, agency and influence.[7] This approach involves a dual critique: first, of the West's monopoly over theory production; and second, of the universalization of concepts that emerged in specific historical contexts as if they were equally valid explanatory tools for all actors.

It also draws attention to the limitations of existing theoretical instruments in accommodating contributions from the non-Western world, highlighting an imbalance in knowledge production that is no less significant than inequalities in the distribution of material power.[8]

In this context, the concept of the "Global South" is not employed as a geographical label or a homogeneous political bloc, but rather as a structural position within the international system, defined by the degree of unequal integration into the global division of labor and by the nature of interdependence with the system's centers. Analyses of the global system, drawing on the distinction between center, periphery and semi-periphery, have demonstrated that a state's position within this hierarchy shapes its strategic room for maneuver and determines the limits of its foreign policy options.[9]

Amin also stressed that unequal exchange relations not only generate economic dependency but also reproduce forms of epistemic dominance that render the very criteria of evaluation reflective of the center's standpoint. As a result, a state located in the semi-periphery does not operate within a neutral field of possibilities, but rather under structural conditions that reshape both its instrumentsanditsoutcomes.[10]

This, in turn, requires a reconsideration of the criterion of agency itself. Mainstream scholarship/literature tends to measure agency in terms of influence and the capacity to impose will or reshape the international environment. Such criteria reflect the experience of major powers endowed with extensive material and institutional resources. However, when applied to developing countries,

they often result in labeling them as "weak" or "failed," without questioning the adequacy of the criteria themselves. Moreover, critical literature on unequal sovereignty has shown that the agency of post-colonial states is exercised within a system that places prior constraints on its scope. This necessitates redefining agency as a relative capacity to achieve objectives within specific structural constraints, rather than as an absolute capacity to impose will or generate hegemony.[11]

Consequently, the concept of "presence" must be reframed from a Global South perspective as a pattern of gradual engagement shaped by the interaction between a state's structural position, its available instruments and the contexts within which it operates. This shift is consistent with studies on the Global South's position in world politics, which argue that South–South relations are not grounded in rigid alliances or in the reproduction of traditional power balances, but rather in adaptive and selective arrangements reflecting disparities in resources and differences in priorities.[12] In this sense, presence is assessed in terms of sustainability and the capacity to diversify options, rather than merely by its scale or geographical scope.

This definition requires incorporating an interactive dimension into the analysis. Presence is not a unidirectional process emanating from a state and imposed upon a passive environment; rather, it is constituted through interactions with other actors who themselves pursue strategies of partner diversification and risk management.[13] Within this framework, reducing Southern states to passive recipients reproduces a form of cognitive centrism that assumes agency resides primarily at the center, while marginalizing the capacity of these states to maneuver and reshape interactions. Accordingly, reconstructing the concept of presence requires moving from a one-way model to an interactive one, in which agency is understood as the outcome of reciprocal relations within an unbalancedstructure.[14]

In light of the foregoing, presence in the Global South is not assessed solely through quantitative indicators such as the volume of investments or the number of agreements, but rather through its contribution to expanding a state's margin of maneuver within the international system and its capacity to redistribute risks and opportunities under existing constraints. Agency, in this sense, is relative and context-dependent, determined by a state's ability to convert its structural position into a space for maneuver, even when it remains far from any hegemonic position.

This shift in evaluative criteria allows for a reinterpretation of cases traditionally categorized as having limited impact, viewing them instead as expressions of adaptive strategies within a constrained structure, rather than as failures to meet externally derived standards of power. Accordingly, invoking a Global South perspective recalibrates the analytical lens applied to the phenomenon under study, shifting the focus from questions of the extent of influence to questions concerning the nature of possible agency from a non-hegemonic position.

Contours of Iran's Foreign Policy and Its Presence in Africa

Analyzing Iran's presence in Africa requires moving beyond general descriptions toward a deconstruction of the determinants of its foreign policy as the outcome of the interaction between internal and external factors operating within a constrained international context. Approaches to Iranian foreign policy suggest that Iran's behavior is shaped within a complex institutional framework, in which policy choices are formulated through formal mechanisms that integrate security, economic and political considerations, with priority given to national security and regime preservation.[15] Accordingly, perceptions of external threat, the pursuit of reduced isolation and the diversification of channels of international engagement emerge as key determinants guiding foreign policy action.[16] These factors become even more salient in light of the intensification of sanctions over the past decade, as economic restrictions have reshaped patterns of external engagement by pushing the state to seek alternative avenues less dependent on the Western financial system. Within this context, the diversification of geographical partnerships, including renewed engagement with Africa, is better understood as an extension of the reorganization of foreign relations under these constraints, rather than as an autonomous strategic shift detached from its structural environment.

These constraints are reflected in the nature of Iran's presence on the continent, which is selective and geographically concentrated in East Africa, particularly in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania. This region is considered suitable for the deployment of economic diplomacy tools in sectors such as agriculture, technical and engineering services, pharmaceuticals and certain low-cost industrial activities.[17]

This pattern does not indicate an even distribution of engagement across the continent so much as it reflects a calculated allocation of resources shaped by logistical and political considerations, within the framework of what is domestically referred to as the "resistance economy."[18] Iranian exports to African countries reached approximately $1.2 billion in the year ending March 2022, compared to around $579 million in the preceding year.[19] This represents a relatively significant increase; however, it remains limited in comparative terms, particularly when set against Chinese–African trade, which exceeded $250 billion annually during the same period.[20] Iranian exports to Africa are concentrated in petrochemical products, plastics, selected industrial goods, agricultural equipment and pharmaceuticals, while imports from several African countries remain confined largely to raw materials and specific commodity goods.[21]

On the diplomatic front, the revitalization of Iran's presence in Africa during the tenure of former President Ebrahim Raisi was linked to an effort to integrate the continent more firmly into its foreign policy orientation at a time marked by stalled negotiations with the United States and European powers over the nuclear issue, alongside sustained economic pressure and financial isolation.[22] Within this context, 2023 witnessed a presidential tour encompassing Kenya, Uganda

and Zimbabwe, during which memoranda of understanding were announced in the fields of trade, energy, agriculture and health.[23] This formed part of a broader trend toward institutionalizing diplomatic engagement in East and Southern Africa. The initiative was accompanied by official rhetoric grounded in the principles of South–South cooperation, respect for sovereignty and non-interference. However, an examination of these relations suggests that the reopening of embassies and the convening of joint committees were not consistently matched by a corresponding expansion in economic resources or investment flows, rendering the diplomatic presence more visible in its symbolic and institutional dimensions than in the depth of its material economic engagement.

Moreover, Iran's presence is shaped within a multilateral framework, in which its agency is not determined solely by Tehran's agency, but is also conditioned by the strategies of other actors on the continent. African states themselves pursue policies of partner diversification and external balancing to avoid dependency on any single actor, which renders any external presence subject to complex local and regional dynamics. Analyses further indicate that competition with other regional and global actors, alongside considerations related to Iran's international image, influence the scope of potential expansion in bilateral relations. This also extends to cultural and educational instruments, which may encounter official or societal reservations due, in some cases, to concerns over sectarian sensitivities, thereby producing differentiated impacts depending on the specific local context.[24]

Data indicate that patterns of Iran's presence in Africa emerge at the intersection of internal institutional determinants, external economic and structural constraints and multi-actor African contexts. These factors determining patterns of Iranian presence are discussed below within the framework of a Global South perspective.

- **Constrained agency:**[25] Iran operates in Africa within the limits imposed by the structure of the international system and its semi-peripheral position within it, in addition to a comprehensive sanctions regime that restricts its capacity for financing, fund transfers and market access. In this sense, agency does not imply absence of action, but rather action exercised within a restricted margin of maneuver, oriented toward managing a non-hegemonic position within an unequal international system.
- **Adaptive agency:**[26] Iran's engagement with East Africa appears less as an autonomous expansionist project and more as a mechanism for redistributing risks. Agency thus takes on an adaptive character, aimed at reducing vulnerability and compensating for constraints, without implying a qualitative transformation in the state's position within the international balance of power. The ability to sustain alternative channels, however limited, reflects a form of agency associated with managing constraints rather than overcoming them.

■ **Relational Agency**:[27] The outcomes of Iran's presence are not determined solely by Tehran's intentions, but are shaped through interaction with African states that themselves pursue strategies of partner diversification and of maximizing gains from competition among external actors. In this context, Iranian agency becomes the product of reciprocal relations rather than a unidirectional trajectory, rendering it inherently relative and contingent upon the local environment's capacity to accommodate it within its internal dynamics.

This reading points to a broader methodological implication: reframing from a Global South perspective does not merely add a descriptive layer, but rather reconfigures the very question of analysis. Instead of focusing on the extent of "expansion," attention shifts, on the one hand, to how Iran manages constraints, and on the other, to how it leverages its non-hegemonic position as a relative space of maneuver within an unequal international system.

In this sense, Iran's presence in Africa does not appear as an expansionist project, but rather as a continuous process of repositioning within a structure that constrains it while simultaneously offering limited opportunities for action. The central question, therefore, is not whether Iran is expanding, but how it manages the limits of its power within its international context.

Conclusion

The paper concludes that Iran's presence in Africa cannot be fully understood when assessed through metrics derived from the experience of dominant powers endowed with abundant resources and the capacity to reshape regional and international environments. Reframing the analysis from a Global South perspective highlights the need to interrogate the very standard of agency itself, and to move beyond reducing the assessment of this presence to quantitative comparisons or measures of influence. Instead, it calls for an analysis of how a state operates within an asymmetrical structure and of its capacity to maximize its scope for action within the constraints imposed by its structural constraints.

The analysis shows that Iran's foreign policy toward Africa is shaped at the intersection of domestic determinants related to the structure of decision-making and national security priorities, as well as external constraints associated with sanctions and the state's position within the international system, and diverse African contexts in which multiple actors pursue their own strategies of partner diversification and gain maximization. Accordingly, patterns of Iranian presence — whether reflected in its intensified presence in East Africa, its sectoral selectivity in particular fields or its intensive diplomatic engagement accompanied by relatively limited economic resources — appear to reflect a logic of management of constraints more than a coherent expansionist project. In this sense, Iranian agency is best understood not as the capacity to reconfigure regional or global balances of power, but rather as a relative capacity to sustain alternative channels

of engagement, redistribute risks and reduce vulnerability within a constraining international environment.

This interpretation does not deny the geopolitical or ideological dimensions of Iranian foreign policy. Rather, it situates them within a broader analytical framework that links domestic institutional determinants, external structural constraints and the dynamics of African contexts. As a result, the analytical focus shifts from the question of the "extent of expansion" to that of the "nature of possible agency," and from assessing presence according to standards of dominance to understanding it as an ongoing practice of negotiation within an unequal international structure. Herein lies the paper's theoretical significance: it not only offers a reinterpretation of a particular case but also contributes to a broader debate on how the roles of Global South actors should be analyzed in international relations. More specifically, it proposes an epistemological shift from reliance on ready-made concepts toward interrogating the historical and intellectual conditions under which such concepts are produced, and from measuring phenomena against fixed normative benchmarks to reconsidering the benchmark itself within the context of global power relations.

Accordingly, reframing Iran's presence in Africa extends beyond the limits of this particular case and opens a broader research agenda concerning how patterns of external engagement by Global South states can be understood within an international system whose political and epistemological foundations continue to reflect deep structural asymmetries. The central task, therefore, is not to prove or disprove the "scale" of presence, but rather to develop analytical tools capable of capturing the plurality of forms of agency in a world that can no longer be adequately understood through the lens of a single center.

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Received	Accepted	Published
December 28, 2025	April 29, 2026	June 17, 2026

THE WATER CRISIS IN IRAN: THE PROBLEM OF SUSTAINABILITY AND STRATEGIC REPERCUSSIONS

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Abstract

Over recent decades, Iran has experienced a severe escalation in its water crisis, transforming it from an environmental concern into a structural challenge that threatens economic, social and political stability. The paper argues that the roots of the crisis extend beyond natural water scarcity and climate change, encompassing failures in water governance, weak planning mechanisms, the politicization of environmental policymaking and the neglect of scientific warnings. It seeks to analyze the institutional foundations of the crisis and assess its implications for food security, social stability and infrastructure, while also evaluating the viability and long-term sustainability of proposed alternatives, including water desalination, water transfer projects and demand-management policies.

Employing a public policy analysis approach, the paper concludes that the continuation of current policies is widening the implementation gap and further intensifying the crisis, making water scarcity one of the most serious strategic threats to Iran's future stability.

Keywords: Iran, water crisis, sustainability, water governance, food security, strategic challenges.

Introduction

Despite Iran being situated largely within arid and semi-arid climatic zones, the sharp escalation of the country's water crisis in recent years raises a research problem that extends beyond explanations based solely on natural scarcity. The central question of this paper concerns how the water challenge evolved from a manageable technical issue into a structural crisis affecting the sustainability of urban life in major cities such as Tehran and Isfahan, while also carrying implications for national security.

The paper seeks to address this question by testing the hypothesis that deficiencies in water governance, the politicization of development policies and the marginalization of scientific considerations in public decision-making have been decisive factors in intensifying the crisis and transforming it into a strategic threat to state stability.

Historical Background and Topographical Dimension

Iran's water crisis predates contemporary developments and is deeply rooted in the country's geographical environment. The Iranian plateau lies within an arid and semi-arid[(1)] climatic belt characterized by irregular seasonal rainfall, stark geographical disparities in the distribution of water resources and high evaporation rates. These conditions have made water an existential issue since the earliest stages of human settlement in Iran. Scarcity was therefore not an exceptional circumstance, but rather the natural context within which urbanization, agriculture and social organization evolved. In ancient times, particularly during the Achaemenid Empire period, Iranians developed the underground canal system known as the *qanat* or *karez,* an engineering innovation designed to transfer groundwater from elevated aquifers to agricultural lands through subterranean tunnels, thereby reducing losses caused by evaporation.[(2)] This system became the foundation of agricultural stability across extensive parts of the Iranian interior and enabled the emergence of cities and productive centers in relatively arid environments. The *qanat* system was not merely a technical solution; it was also associated with a sophisticated framework governing water ownership and distribution. This framework constituted a precise legal and social system regulating water shares and rights of usage, reflecting an early awareness of the importance of effective management of scarce water resources.[(3)]

During the Islamic and medieval eras, underground canal systems continued to constitute the backbone of agricultural production in Iran. Nevertheless, the country experienced recurring periods of drought that affected various regions and, at times, resulted in population displacement or the decline of entire cities. Responses to these crises generally centered on rehabilitating existing *qanat* networks, excavating new channels or redistributing water resources among villages and agricultural areas.[(4)] Under the Safavid dynasty, the state pursued more organized irrigation policies, expanding irrigation networks in some central regions while continuing to depend primarily on groundwater resources. Although

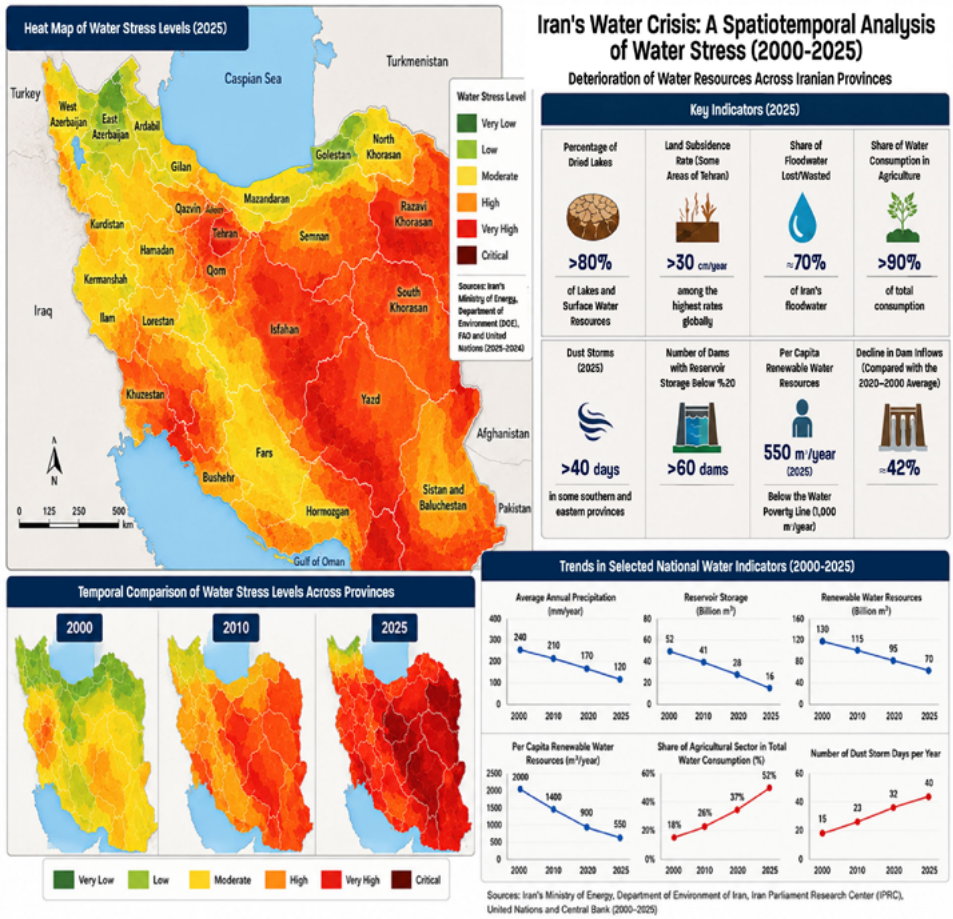
these systems succeeded in maintaining a relative ecological and agricultural balance for centuries, they remained fundamentally dependent on the regularity of rainfall and the natural rates of groundwater recharge.[5]

In the 19th century, the water crisis in Iran deepened as a result of population growth and the deterioration of traditional irrigation canal maintenance in certain regions. Periods of severe drought coincided with economic and political crises, contributing to widespread famines, most notably the famine of the 1870s, which exposed the vulnerability of the agricultural system to climatic fluctuations.[6] Despite these challenges, the responses adopted at the time largely remained within the traditional framework, relying on the repair or expansion of irrigation canals without introducing a fundamental transformation in the philosophy of water management. A major turning point emerged in the 20th century with the introduction of modern drilling technologies and mechanical pumps into the water sector, particularly from the mid-20th century onward. These developments enabled the extraction of increasingly large quantities of groundwater, in some areas exceeding natural recharge rates. At the same time, the government initiated the construction of large dams aimed at storing surface water and regulating seasonal water flows. This transition reflected a broader shift from a philosophy based on adapting to scarcity toward one centered on engineering control over water resources. However, the arid climate and high evaporation rates reduced the efficiency of some of these projects, while pressure on underground aquifers continued to intensify.

During the 1990s, Iran experienced a significant escalation in water stress as a result of recurring droughts and rising temperatures. These developments contributed to declining groundwater levels, the drying up of some historic canal systems and falling water levels in inland bodies of water such as Lake Urmia. These developments suggest that the deeper origins of Iran's water crisis — as a structural imbalance between renewable water resources and human consumption — can be traced to the second half of the 20th century. During this period, rates of extraction began to exceed the capacity of renewable resources to replenish themselves, driven by uncontrolled expansion in groundwater pumping and dam construction, alongside weak institutional coordination. The resulting crisis has generated political, social and economic repercussions, reinforcing the argument that the core of the problem is linked less to the inherent characteristics of Iran's arid climate than to deficiencies in governance and demand management.

Environmental and economic indicators in Iran reveal that the water crisis is no longer merely a problem of resource scarcity, but has evolved into a multidimensional structural crisis that directly threatens the country's national security as well as its social and economic stability. For more than two decades, the country has faced successive waves of drought, accompanied by a sharp decline in precipitation rates and an unprecedented reduction in the storage levels of dams and groundwater reserves. Some of the major dams supplying the capital,

Tehran, have fallen to approximately 10% of their storage capacity, while dozens of other dams are now on the verge of drying up.[7] The crisis is further aggravated by the excessive depletion of groundwater resources: more than 70% of Iran's plains have entered critical or "water-prohibited" zones. This has coincided with land subsidence rates in parts of Tehran exceeding 30 centimeters per year — one of the highest rates recorded globally. In addition, estimates indicate that more than 80% of Iranian lakes have dried up, while vast areas of wetlands have been transformed into sources of dust storms.[8]



This situation reflects the expansion of the crisis from a purely environmental issue into a direct threat to the country's economic, urban and public health infrastructure. This is clearly illustrated by the following heat map, which shows the varying degrees of deterioration in water resources across Iran's different regions.

These figures reveal a profound imbalance in the management model of water resources. This imbalance is particularly evident in the continued pursuit of water-intensive agricultural policies, unbalanced urban and industrial expansion and the low efficiency of irrigation and storage networks. Furthermore, economic sanctions have significantly hindered the modernization of water infrastructure and investment in desalination and water recycling technologies. Consequently, the water crisis in Iran is no longer solely an environmental issue; it has become a clear indicator of a broader crisis in governance and comprehensive development that threatens the long-term sustainability of the state and society.

Iran's water crisis represents a complex condition shaped by the cumulative interaction between natural constraints and structural as well as administrative factors, transforming initial climatic scarcity into a prolonged structural crisis. From a geographical and climatic perspective, Iran lies largely within arid and semi-arid zones, with average annual rainfall estimated at approximately 228 millimeters, substantially below the global average. Rainfall distribution across the country is highly uneven, with the highest precipitation levels concentrated in the northern regions bordering the Caspian Sea, while central and southeastern regions experience significantly lower levels of rainfall.

Table 1: Disparities in Water Resources Across Iran's Major Basins

Name of Basin	Share of Iran's Total Area (%)	Share of Renewable Water Resources (%)
Markazi	52	29
Arabian Gulf and Gulf of Oman	25	46
Caspian Sea Basin	10	15
Hamoon	7	2
Lake Urmia	3	5
Sarakhs	3	3

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), I*rrigation in the Middle East Region in Figures: AQUASTAT Survey 2008*, Water Reports No. 34 (Rome: FAO, 2009), 189, https://www.fao.org/4/i0936e/i0936e00.pdf.

The country's hydrological system also suffers from a pronounced temporal imbalance, as precipitation is concentrated mainly during the winter season, followed by long and dry summers. This pattern contributes to elevated evaporation rates and reduces the effective volume of water available for both surface storage and groundwater replenishment. In addition, the mountainous topography of

many water basins[9] accelerates surface runoff and weakens the long-term natural recharge capacity of underground aquifers.[10]

However, despite creating a condition of structural water scarcity, these environmental characteristics alone would likely not have evolved into a chronic crisis had they not intersected with broader development policies and patterns of governance. These factors include the succession of different administrations alongside weak coordination among state institutions, the random prioritization of large-scale projects detached from principles of sound resource management and the absence of participatory policymaking and transparent governance mechanisms.

The crisis has also been exacerbated by poor agricultural planning and weak resource management, in addition to unregulated urban expansion, administrative corruption and the lack of effective emergency planning mechanisms for dealing with climate change and recurring droughts in Iran.

Successive Administrative Bodies Characterized By Weak Coordination

The succession of administrations and the multiplicity of institutions involved in water resource management constitute one of the structural roots of the water crisis in Iran. Over time, a governance model emerged that combined formal centralization with a practical fragmentation of decision-making centers and overlapping jurisdictions among the Ministries of Energy and Agriculture, the Environmental Protection Organization, urban planning bodies and local authorities. Water management responsibilities were therefore distributed among institutions with differing sectoral priorities and without an effective coordination mechanism. This institutional fragmentation contributed to inconsistent and fragmented policies, weakened coherence in decision-making and encouraged the prioritization of short-term considerations at the expense of long-term sustainability. In addition, the changing orientations of successive administrations hindered the development of a cumulative reform process grounded in periodic assessment and institutional continuity. Limited transparency and the absence of comprehensive data further obstructed evidence-based planning and reduced the state's capacity to regulate irregular water use, particularly in relation to unlicensed wells. As a result, water governance remained dominated by a fragmented sectoral logic, far removed from an integrated management approach. This dynamic transformed natural scarcity into a chronic institutional crisis that, according to the paper's argument, could have been anticipated had Iranian authorities not continued policies associated with the mismanagement and depletion of natural resources. In this context, researcher Kaveh Madani, director of the United Nations University Institute for Water, Environment and Health, described the situation as a form of "bankruptcy management" resulting from resource mismanagement and depletion.[11]

Focusing on Megaprojects Without Diligence

Water management in Iran has been marked by a pronounced emphasis on large-scale engineering projects within a security-oriented and technocratic framework that treats water resources as an issue tied to national sovereignty and security. This approach prioritized expanding supply through dam construction and increasing water storage capacity.

However, reports have indicated that water reserves in dams supplying Mashhad and eastern regions of the country have fallen to critical levels. The director-general of the Mashhad Water Company stated that reservoir levels in these dams had declined to less than 3% of their total capacity due to prolonged drought conditions.[12] Reports also cited Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian warning that the continuation of drought conditions could lead to water rationing measures and even force the evacuation of Tehran if the crisis persists. Meanwhile, Abbas Aliabadi, the minister of energy, confirmed that the government might resort to suspending evening water supplies in order to allow dam reservoirs to recover.[13] Despite the scale of these infrastructure projects, the strategy of increasing supply without implementing effective demand management mechanisms has contributed to what may be described as a "bounce-back" effect. The perception of expanded water availability encouraged further growth in water-intensive activities, particularly in the agricultural sector, thereby reproducing water deficits cyclically rather than alleviating the underlying structural pressure on resources.

Uncontrolled Urban Growth in the Absence of Integrated Policymaking

Rapid urban expansion and accelerating population have intensified the imbalance between water supply and demand in Iran. While urban and industrial water needs have continued to rise, the volume of renewable water resources has remained relatively stable. Press reports indicate that per capita renewable water availability has steadily declined, approaching the water stress threshold defined by the Falkenmark Index (1,700 cubic meters per year per person). This decline is attributed to population growth and the expansion of major cities such as Tehran and Mashhad, without corresponding improvements in integrated water management planning. Additional reports highlight the impact of rapid urbanization on water supply networks and infrastructure, noting that increasing pressure on surrounding basins has exceeded their natural replenishment capacity.[14] This situation is closely linked to the absence of effective participatory water governance policies. Mechanisms for involving local communities, farmers and municipalities in water-related decision-making have remained limited, weakening compliance with conservation measures and contributing to a growing trust deficit between the state and society. Consequently, population growth combined with weak urban planning and the lack of transparent participatory governance has transformed demographic pressure from a manageable challenge into a prolonged structural crisis.[15]

Table 2: Iran's Renewable Fresh Water

Year	Annual Renewable Water Availability (cubic meters per capita)
1956	7000
2000	2001
2018	1700
2025	1300
Future	750

Source: Kaveh Madani Larijani, "Iran's Water Crisis: Inducers, Challenges and Counter-Measures" (paper presented at the 45th Congress of the European Regional Science Association, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Amsterdam, Netherlands, August 23–27, 2005), 9–10.

Climate Change, Recurrent Drought and Poor Agricultural Planning

The shift from natural water scarcity to a structural water crisis in Iran is closely associated with development choices adopted since the second half of the 20th century. The country pursued a development model that prioritized agricultural expansion and the goal of food self-sufficiency. This approach led to a steady increase in irrigated land, alongside major investments in dams, irrigation networks and inter-basin water transfer projects, collectively raising overall water demand to levels approaching the limits of available renewable resources. It is estimated that the agricultural sector accounts for approximately 90% of total water withdrawals — significantly higher than the global average — reflecting a structural imbalance in sectoral water use. In response to rising demand, reliance on groundwater sources increased substantially, with around 60% of irrigation now dependent on groundwater extraction. This situation, combined with subsidies for energy used in pumping, reduced the effective cost of water and weakened incentives for conservation, contributing to the widespread expansion of both legal and illegal wells and the progressive depletion of aquifers.[16] These dynamics have been accompanied by clear environmental degradation, including declining groundwater levels and the emergence of phenomena such as land subsidence and soil salinization, which have reduced the resilience of the water system. At the same time, climate change and recurring droughts have intensified these pressures, as rainfall patterns have become more erratic and generally declined, limiting the capacity of water basins to recover and complicating long-term planning amid growing agricultural and industrial demand.[17]

Administrative Corruption and Political Loyalties

The Iranian water crisis underscores a strong administrative and political dimension, with institutional corruption and governance failures identified as key

drivers of unequal water distribution across regions, reflecting political and economic priorities rather than hydrological necessity.

For example, Iran's Isfahan Province experienced widespread protests by farmers who accused the authorities of diverting water from the Zayandeh River away from agricultural lands toward industrial uses and other regions, particularly Yazd. These diversions contributed to a severe local crisis and reduced water availability, even as drought conditions worsened.

In response, some protesters reportedly damaged water pipelines in protest against what they viewed as violations of their water rights. Meanwhile, Iranian authorities were compelled to shut down certain facilities and dispatch water tankers to supply Yazd, reflecting the prioritization of industrial development and politically or economically strategic cities. This dynamic has contributed to recurring social tensions.[18] Analytical assessments further suggest that inter-basin water transfers have not been guided solely by technical or climatic considerations, but have also been shaped by networks of political and economic interests. These arrangements have tended to favor central industrial centers, including heavy industries in Isfahan and Yazd, at the expense of agricultural regions and local communities, thereby deepening perceptions of injustice and weakening public confidence in state water governance.[19]

Proposed Solutions and Strategies for Remediation

With the worsening water crisis in Iran and its growing economic, social and environmental consequences, the government and research institutions have proposed a set of technical and administrative measures aimed at reducing pressure on water resources and improving water security in the medium and long term. These proposals include expanding desalination capacity, applying cloud seeding technologies, promoting water recycling and wastewater treatment and modernizing agricultural irrigation systems.[20] However, an assessment of these options shows significant differences in their economic feasibility, environmental impact and capacity to ensure long-term sustainability. This makes it necessary to evaluate them within the broader framework of integrated water resources management.

Desalination as a Strategy to Enhance Water Supply

Desalination has become an increasingly prominent option in water policy debates in Iran, particularly in light of declining domestic water resources and recurring droughts across many basins. In this context, the government has proposed large-scale projects to transfer desalinated water from the Arabian Gulf and the Sea of Oman toward the Iranian plateau to supply cities and industrial zones.

A notable example is an approximately 800-kilometer pipeline designed to transport desalinated water from the Sea of Oman to the central plateau, including major industrial facilities in Isfahan Province, such as the Mobarakeh Steel

Complex.[21] This initiative is intended to reduce pressure on inland river systems affected by recurrent droughts, particularly the Zayandeh River, which has experienced a significant decline in flow in recent years.

However, several studies indicate that this approach faces substantial economic and environmental constraints. According to an analysis published by the Stimson Center, desalination combined with long-distance water transfer requires very large investments in infrastructure and energy consumption, in addition to potential water losses during transport across arid desert regions. Environmental concerns are also significant, particularly regarding the discharge of brine produced during desalination into marine ecosystems, which may increase coastal water salinity and negatively affect marine biodiversity. Some researchers argue that while desalination may be suitable for meeting urban and industrial demand in coastal areas, it is considerably less viable for large-scale agricultural use due to its high cost relative to agricultural economic returns.[22]

Cloud Seeding to Enhance Rainfall

In addition to desalination initiatives, Iran has increasingly turned to cloud seeding technology as a supplementary method to enhance rainfall in drought-affected regions. This technique involves dispersing chemical substances into clouds to encourage condensation and increase the likelihood of precipitation. In recent years, Iranian authorities have carried out multiple aerial and ground-based cloud seeding operations across various parts of the country. While some studies suggest that cloud seeding may produce limited increases in rainfall under specific meteorological conditions, its effectiveness remains a subject of scientific debate. The success of such operations depends on the presence of suitable cloud formations with sufficient density and moisture content — conditions that are often absent in areas already experiencing prolonged low rainfall. As a result, many experts argue that cloud seeding cannot serve as a comprehensive solution to the crisis, but rather as a supplementary measure with limited potential benefits in specific cases. From an economic perspective, cloud seeding programs are relatively less costly than large-scale desalination or inter-basin water transfer projects. However, their overall impact remains constrained in the context of a structural water crisis driven by weak governance of water resources and persistently high demand, particularly in the agricultural sector.

Water Recycling and Wastewater Treatment

Reusing treated wastewater is considered a promising option for enhancing water availability without placing additional pressure on natural resources in Iran. Numerous reports indicate that a substantial share of wastewater remains underutilized, with large volumes discharged without adequate treatment, effectively representing a loss of a potentially recoverable water resource that could be reused across multiple sectors. One of the main advantages of this approach is that it is generally less costly than desalination, while also helping to reduce

environmental pollution caused by the discharge of untreated wastewater into rivers and lakes. Treated wastewater can be used for irrigating non-food crops or for industrial purposes, thereby easing pressure on freshwater sources. However, expanding wastewater reuse requires significant investment in sewage networks and treatment infrastructure, along with the establishment of a clear regulatory framework defining reuse standards and ensuring water safety. It also necessitates greater public awareness and acceptance of the use of treated water in certain economic activities.

Upgrading Irrigation Systems and Enhancing Water-Use Efficiency in Agriculture

Improving water-use efficiency in the agricultural sector is considered one of the most important responses to the water crisis in Iran, particularly given that agriculture consumes around 90% of the country's total water resources while contributing only about 12% to GDP. A large share of agricultural activity still relies on traditional irrigation methods, such as flood irrigation, which are highly inefficient and result in substantial water losses through evaporation and seepage. Accordingly, many studies advocate transitioning toward modern irrigation systems such as drip and sprinkler technologies, which can significantly reduce water consumption while improving agricultural productivity. However, some researchers emphasize that irrigation modernization must be accompanied by broader agricultural policy reforms. These include reassessing the cultivation of water-intensive crops in arid regions and encouraging crops better suited to local climatic conditions. Without such structural adjustments, improvements in irrigation efficiency may also produce a bounce-back effect, whereby water savings are offset by the expansion of irrigated land, ultimately increasing total water consumption rather than reducing it.

The foregoing review of proposed responses to the water crisis in Iran indicates that none of the available options can be considered a standalone solution. Instead, they must be assessed within a comprehensive water resources management framework. Any proposed solution to Iran's water crisis must include profound structural changes. Rather than merely addressing technical issues, it requires comprehensive institutional reform to strengthen cross-sectoral integration and reshape agricultural policies based on actual water availability. Furthermore, demand management must be reassessed by restructuring price scales, improving irrigation efficiency and strengthening governance mechanisms.

Political, Socioeconomic Repercussions

The water crisis in Iran is no longer a purely environmental issue; it has evolved into a complex phenomenon with wide-ranging political, economic and social consequences. The interaction between limited natural water resources, water-intensive development choices and weak governance has directly affected

food and water security, as well as patterns of urban expansion in major cities.

The accelerated depletion of groundwater has intensified land subsidence and aggravated environmental degradation, posing risks to infrastructure and ecological stability.[23] At the same time, the crisis has disrupted industrial sectors and contributed to rising social tensions and protests, increasingly emerging as a factor undermining the country's political and economic stability.

The Impact on Food and Water Security and Urban Growth

The repercussions of the crisis are not limited to water scarcity alone, but extend to food security, water security and the sustainability of urban growth in major cities in Iran. Analyses suggest that the crisis stems from structural imbalances in resource management and development policies, and has been further exacerbated by prolonged drought and climate change, making its impacts multidimensional and interconnected.[24]

In terms of food security, water scarcity has significantly affected the agricultural sector, which consumes the vast majority of the country's available water — estimated at over 80%–90% of total consumption — while contributing a relatively small share to gross domestic product (GDP). This pattern of intensive water use reduces resource efficiency, limits the extent of irrigable land, increases the risk of crop failure, lowers agricultural productivity and raises dependence on food imports. A report in *Tehran Times* indicated that water scarcity has reduced the flow of rivers and irrigation canals, threatening the productive capacity of local farms and increasing the cost of agricultural production.[25]

At the level of urban water security, major cities in Iran such as Tehran, Isfahan and Mashhad are experiencing severe water shortages as a result of declining dam reserves and ongoing groundwater depletion. In Tehran in particular, some reservoirs supplying the city have fallen to levels below 10% of their capacity. This situation prompted Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to warn of the possibility of implementing water rationing measures, and even raised the prospect of evacuating the capital if sufficient rainfall does not occur. These warnings underscore the severity of the crisis and its direct impact on the basic water supply of urban populations.[26]

In terms of urban growth and development, rising water demand in cities across Iran has placed increasing pressure on existing infrastructure, which has struggled to keep pace with expanding needs. Population growth in major urban centers has further intensified demand for essential services such as drinking water, sanitation and energy, all of which require reliable water supplies.

However, declining rainfall, continuous groundwater depletion and weak urban planning have reduced cities' capacity to meet this growing demand, widening the gap between available water resources and the requirements of urban expansion.[27] Overall, these developments indicate that Iran's water crisis has moved beyond a purely technical environmental challenge to become a multidimensional threat to food security, water security and sustainable urban devel-

opment. This situation calls for comprehensive strategic interventions that go beyond fragmented or temporary measures such as short-term rationing, and instead emphasize long-term institutional reforms and enabling policy frameworks.

Depletion of Groundwater Resources, Inducing Land Subsidence and Environmental Degradation

Groundwater resources represent a vital strategic reserve in Iran, particularly in the context of severe rainfall deficits and recurring droughts. However, this reserve has itself come under unprecedented pressure due to intensive and largely unregulated extraction.

A comprehensive assessment of the crisis indicates that excessive groundwater consumption — driven by intensive agricultural policies, the absence of effective water pricing mechanisms and weak oversight of wells — has led to a significant decline in groundwater levels across many basins. As a result, groundwater has increasingly shifted from serving as a buffer against water scarcity to becoming a central factor in exacerbating the crisis.

Moreover, the agricultural sector, which accounts for approximately 90% of total water withdrawals, relies heavily on groundwater pumping, with groundwater supplying nearly 60% of irrigation needs. This reliance is reinforced by the lack of strict regulatory control over wells and the absence of realistic pricing structures that reflect the true cost of extraction and treatment. Consequently, many farmers have resorted to drilling deep wells to meet their water demands, often without effective regulation or enforcement, contributing to continuous depletion of aquifers in several regions.[28] Data from specialized studies further show that certain groundwater basins in Iran have experienced sharp annual declines at rates exceeding the global average. This trend indicates that the water system has progressively lost much of its natural resilience, becoming increasingly vulnerable to climatic shocks and rising demand pressures.

One of the most significant environmental consequences of groundwater depletion in Iran is land subsidence, defined as the gradual sinking of the ground surface resulting from the loss of water in sedimentary soil layers. Analytical reports indicate that subsidence rates in certain regions have reached historically high levels compared to previous decades, posing serious risks to critical infrastructure such as roads, railways, airports and residential areas. This deformation of land structure represents one of the most severe manifestations of the crisis, as it increases maintenance and reconstruction costs while also threatening public safety.[29]

In addition to subsidence, a range of sensitive ecosystems — including salt lakes and wetlands — are under increasing threat due to declining water levels, rising soil salinity and reduced surface runoff. This environmental degradation not only undermines biodiversity but also contributes to a higher frequency of

dust storms affecting both urban and rural areas, with negative consequences for public health and air quality.

Reports also highlight that Lake Urmia — one of the largest salt lakes in the Middle East — has experienced a rapid reduction in its surface area, disrupting local climatic conditions and ecological balance in surrounding regions.

Overall, the depletion of groundwater resources in Iran is no longer merely a response to immediate water needs, but rather a manifestation of deeper systemic challenges, including weak regulatory frameworks, inadequate governance and pricing structures that fail to reflect the real cost of water. These developments have produced serious environmental consequences such as increased land subsidence and ongoing ecosystem degradation, underscoring that Iran's water crisis is not simply a matter of scarcity, but a fundamental environmental transformation affecting both natural systems and human life.

Impact on the Domestic Front

Iran's water crisis is among the most serious structural challenges facing Iran today. It has moved beyond the scope of an environmental issue to become a multidimensional crisis with economic, social and political dimensions. This situation has been exacerbated by climate change, declining rainfall, excessive groundwater depletion and systemic mismanagement. More than 80% of water resources are consumed in agriculture using traditional and inefficient methods, further widening the gap between supply and demand.[30]

The water crisis has had profound effects on both the industrial sector and local economies. Water-intensive industries such as petrochemicals and steel production have been particularly affected, especially in regions like Isfahan and Khuzestan Province, which depend on limited and unstable water resources. Water shortages have forced many industrial facilities to reduce output or temporarily suspend operations, while others have adopted costly measures such as water recycling or long-distance water transport, increasing operational costs and reducing competitiveness. The crisis has also been aggravated by uneven industrial expansion in already water-stressed areas, placing additional pressure on limited resources rather than alleviating it.[31] Its impact extends beyond industry to the broader economic and social fabric of affected regions. River diversions and inter-basin transfer projects have reduced agricultural activity and caused significant livestock losses, severely affecting local livelihoods, particularly in Khuzestan Province.[32] In Isfahan, repeated drying episodes of the Zayandeh River have led to declines in agriculture and tourism, further deepening economic losses. Sharp reductions in dam storage levels, in some cases falling to less than one-third of capacity, reflect the severity of the crisis and its wide-ranging consequences across multiple sectors.[33]

International studies indicate that a 20% loss of Iran's water resources could result in a potential 7% reduction in the country's future GDP relative to the 2016 baseline, should the contraction of the agricultural sector and associated

agricultural employment due to water scarcity persist.[34] In addition, Iran's cash crops that generate significant foreign exchange earnings — such as pistachios, saffron and various fruits — would be severely affected by the water crisis. Notably, horticultural crops including oranges, grapes and tea together account for approximately 60% of the total area dedicated to rain-fed horticultural production. Furthermore, the petrochemical industry, which is highly water-intensive, alone represents more than 30% of Iran's non-oil exports and generates roughly $25 billion in annual revenue. Disruption to this sector would deprive the country of a critical source of foreign exchange, thereby contributing to depreciation of the national currency and heightened inflation rates.

It is well established that Iran generates a portion of its domestic electricity from hydropower, which previously accounted for more than 10% of total production. However, this share has declined significantly due to water scarcity. The resulting water shortages have created a substantial electricity generation shortfall of approximately 25,000 megawatts. Power outages have become a recurrent phenomenon over the past three years. In some cases, the country has even been compelled to import electricity, despite its abundant reserves of fossil fuels.

Impact on Social Stability

On the social front, the water crisis in Iran has emerged as a major driver of public protests in recent years. The country has witnessed repeated waves of mobilization, particularly in 2018, 2021 and 2025, with concentrations in provinces such as Khuzestan Province and Sistan and Balochistan Province. These protests have been largely fueled by water shortages and deteriorating living conditions.

The demonstrations have involved a broad social base, including farmers, workers and students, reflecting the transformation of the issue from a narrow service-related concern into a wider societal problem with human rights dimensions. Protesters have increasingly linked access to water with notions of social justice, indicating a growing environmental and rights-based awareness within society.

These dynamics are closely connected to a broader economic context characterized by high inflation, unemployment and declining purchasing power, making the water crisis a contributing factor to social unrest rather than an isolated issue.[35] Perceptions of unequal resource distribution among regions have also deepened the trust deficit between citizens and the state, as public opinion increasingly attributes the worsening crisis to mismanagement more than to natural conditions, reinforcing its complex political and social character.[36]

On the political level, the water crisis in Iran represents a direct structural challenge to internal stability, falling within the framework of "environmental security," where natural resources become integral to national security calculations. The persistence of the crisis without effective structural solutions risks expanding the scope of social unrest, shifting it from demands for basic services

toward broader political demands, particularly as public awareness grows regarding the role of mismanagement in exacerbating the situation.

Competition over increasingly scarce water resources also intensifies regional tensions, especially in marginalized provinces, deepening internal divisions and further weakening national cohesion. In this context, the state's limited capacity to manage water resources efficiently contributes to a gradual erosion of political legitimacy, particularly amid warnings that some cities may approach the so-called "Day Zero"[37] droughts; periods of extreme water scarcity; a scenario associated with the risk of widespread unrest.

The situation is further complicated by economic constraints that limit investment in water infrastructure, thereby reducing the effectiveness of official responses. The political dimension of the crisis also extends beyond national borders, as water scarcity may generate tensions with neighboring countries over shared water resources, while also contributing to internal displacement toward major urban centers, placing additional strain on public services. Consequently, the water crisis has become a key factor in reshaping political balances both domestically and regionally in Iran.[38]

Conclusion

The water crisis in Iran illustrates a complex case in which natural scarcity has evolved into a multidimensional structural crisis through the interaction of environmental constraints with institutional dysfunction and resource mismanagement. The paper concludes that the crisis is no longer solely an environmental challenge, but has become a determining factor influencing economic performance, social conditions and political stability, thereby requiring a comprehensive approach that goes beyond fragmented solutions toward deeper structural reform.

In this context, the roots of the crisis are linked to the interaction between natural limitations, unbalanced development policies and weak governance structures, which together have intensified water scarcity and transformed it into a chronic condition. The resource management model has revealed significant imbalances, particularly an emphasis on increasing water supply without corresponding attention to demand management, alongside weak institutional coordination and limited strategic planning. The crisis has produced wide-ranging economic and environmental consequences, including reduced agricultural and industrial output, groundwater depletion, ecosystem degradation and land subsidence. It has also contributed to rising social protests and a growing perception of inequality in resource distribution, thereby exerting direct pressure on political stability and perceptions of state legitimacy. At the same time, technological responses such as desalination and cloud seeding have demonstrated limited effectiveness in the absence of structural reforms addressing the underlying drivers of demand. Ultimately, sustainable management requires an integrated water resources management approach that prioritizes efficiency

improvements, agricultural policy reform and strengthened transparency and accountability to achieve a more durable balance between available resources and development needs.

Endnotes

(1) The dry belt and the semi-arid belt are two climatic zones characterized by scarce rainfall, high temperatures and high evaporation rates. The dry belt receives very little rainfall (less than about 250 mm annually); deserts and sparse vegetation prevail, and life there depends on limited water resources. It is found across vast areas such as the Sahara Desert, the Arabian Peninsula and Central Asia. The semi-arid belt, by contrast, is a transitional zone that receives relatively higher rainfall (about 250 millimeters – 500 millimeters annually), which allows the spread of grasses and shrubs and limited agricultural activity, while remaining vulnerable to recurrent drought. It appears in regions such as the Sahel zone south of the Sahara and parts of Iran and Central Asia. See: Al-Hassan, Mohamed Ali, & Abdulrahman, Ali Ahmed, *Climate Geography: Climatic Regions and Their Characteristics.* (Cairo: Dar Al-Ma'rifa Al-Jami'iyya, 2015), 142–158.
(2) The transformation of the canal system in the Achaemenid era (6th–4th centuries BCE) into an institutional water policy, where the state encouraged the digging of canals to reclaim land and enhance agricultural stability in arid environments within the empire. Administrative organization and official support contributed to expanding their use and transferring the technology to other regions of West Asia, establishing it as a cornerstone of Achaemenid water engineering. For more see: Fairouz Megdiche-Kharrat, Rachid Ragala, Mohamed Moussa; "Promoting a Sustainable Traditional Technique of Aquifer Water Acquisition Common to Arid Lands: a Case Study of Ghassem Abad Qanat in Yazd Province," (Iran, Water Supply 19, 2, 2019), 527–535.
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Received	Accepted	Published
March 20, 2026	May 1, 2026	June 17, 2026

THE IMPACT OF POLITICAL STABILITY IN SYRIA ON REGIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY

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Abstract

Following the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2014, the Syrian crisis entered a new stage marked by a transition from civil war toward relative political stability. This phase has centered on rebuilding state institutions and restoring the foundations of governance, alongside efforts to reestablish internal cohesion. Despite the substantial challenges accompanying this transition — including questions surrounding the nature of the political system and national identity, the incorporation of armed factions into official security structures, the pursuit of national reconciliation and transitional justice, reconstruction, refugee repatriation and economic recovery — the prospects for strengthening stability in Syria remain significant. Such stability could carry important implications for both regional and international security.

Syria has reportedly avoided becoming a front in the US-Israel war with Iran and has, in this context, also avoided the serious consequences such a confrontation entails. This outcome is attributed to its distancing from Iranian influence.

The study examines the repercussions of the end of armed conflict and the relative improvement in Syria's stability indicators on regional and global security. It addresses several principal dimensions, including the conceptual framework

of political stability and its connection to regional and international security, the transformations that have shaped the Syrian landscape following the fall of the Assad regime and the broader security implications of political stability in Syria.

Keywords: Syria, political stability, political transition in Syria, regional security, international security.

Introduction

The Syrian crisis has constituted one of the most consequential shocks to regional and international security. Since its outbreak in 2011 and subsequent escalation into a protracted civil war that eroded state stability and undermined core institutions, the conflict has extended far beyond domestic boundaries. It has evolved into a multilayered geopolitical confrontation in which local, regional and international dimensions have become deeply interwoven. Its political, security, economic and social repercussions have spread across neighboring countries and the wider international system. These repercussions have been driven by extensive destruction, intensified sectarian fragmentation, the expansion of extremist organizations, escalating cross-border security threats and large-scale displacement flows. The aforesaid have, in turn, contributed to social tensions and rising populist and xenophobic sentiments within host countries.

With the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, the crisis reached its endpoint, marking a transition from civil war — understood as the apex of instability and insecurity — to a new phase characterized by relative political stabilization. This phase is oriented toward rebuilding state institutions, restoring internal cohesion and rebalancing relations among the country's diverse social segments. Despite the considerable challenges associated with this transition — including questions related to governance structure, national identity, the integration of armed factions into the security apparatus, national reconciliation, transitional justice, reconstruction, return of refugees and economic recovery — there remains a significant opportunity to consolidate stability in Syria, with potential positive spillovers for regional and international security. This assessment is further reinforced by Syria's reported success in avoiding the severe consequences of the US-Israel war against Iran, as well as its ability to remain outside the conflict's frontline dynamics. This is attributed to its disengagement from Iranian influence and its distancing from regional bloc politics.

Against this backdrop, the paper seeks to examine the implications of the end of armed conflict and the relative improvement in stability indicators in Syria for regional and international security, based on hypotheses such as the following:

Hypothesis 1: There exists a dialectical relationship between internal political stability and regional and international security, whereby each shapes and is shaped by the other. Stable political orders tend to reinforce security at both regional and global levels — or at a minimum, do not constitute a destabilizing factor — while stable and secure regional and international environments, in turn, provide conducive conditions for domestic stability.

Hypothesis 2: The higher the level of domestic political stability within a state, the greater its contribution to regional and international security. Stable political systems are generally less likely to generate transnational security threats and less inclined toward external aggression, while being more predisposed to participation in cooperative and complementary security frameworks.

Hypothesis 3: There is a positive correlation between the consolidation of political stability in Syria — given its position as a pivotal actor within the Arab regional system — and the strengthening of both regional and international stability and security.

In light of these hypotheses, the paper is structured around three main analytical axes: first, a conceptual examination of political stability and its relationship to regional and international security; second, an analysis of transformations in the Syrian landscape and the post-conflict stability environment; and third, an assessment of the implications of political stability in Syria for regional and international security.

A Conceptual Approach to Political Stability and Its Relationship With Security

Political Security: Conception and Dimensions

To properly assess the dimensions of political stability in Syria and its implications for regional and international security, it is first necessary to clarify the conceptual foundations of these terms and to delineate the broader analytical framework governing the relationship between them.

Political stability constitutes a foundational pillar of the state, reflecting the equilibrium between the political system, societal forces and institutional performance. It is a multidimensional concept that encompasses political legitimacy, governance capacity, social cohesion and the ability of institutions to manage change and conflict through peaceful and orderly mechanisms. A clear understanding of political stability and its constituent dimensions is essential for analyzing its effects, which often extend beyond national boundaries to shape regional and international security environments.

In one sense, political stability denotes the absence of radical or fundamental transformation within the political system, or the occurrence of change within broadly accepted limits.[1] It also refers to a relative absence of violence and popular unrest within the political process of a given state.[2]

From a broader analytical perspective, political stability may be defined as the capacity of a political system to mobilize its institutions in order to implement necessary reforms that respond to public expectations and aspirations, while containing emerging conflicts without resorting to political violence, except in the most limited circumstances required to reinforce its legitimacy and effectiveness.[3] Political stability can be understood as comprising three principal factors:

■ **Effectiveness of political institutions**: This factor refers to the capacity of state institutions to respond to citizens' needs and to address political, economic and social challenges efficiently. It includes the provision of security, the protection of rights and freedoms, the improvement of socioeconomic conditions and the pursuit of development objectives.

■ **Legitimacy of the political system:** This factor concerns the extent to which the ruling authority is consistent with prevailing societal norms, values and priorities, thereby justifying its exercise of power and securing public acceptance without reliance on coercion.

■ **Political behavior:** This factor encompasses two interrelated aspects. The first is the absence of political violence, which includes both state violence directed by governing authorities against citizens or specific groups, and societal violence expressed through acts of resistance against the state or its symbols, as well as intergroup violence within society driven by political, economic, social or religious cleavages. The second is adherence to constitutional and legal frameworks, meaning compliance by state institutions with established legal rules governing their functions and responsibilities, alongside respect by societal actors for legitimate channels of political participation and opposition, as well as observance of laws regulating interactions among individuals and groups within society.

The Concept of Regional Security

Regional security represents one of the principal tiers of security analysis, alongside individual, national and international security. It refers to the security condition of a group of geographically proximate states whose interests and objectives are partially aligned, and which face comparable political and security challenges or threats.

In this sense, regional security denotes the condition in which the security of each state is structurally linked to the broader regional environment, such that it cannot be fully achieved in isolation from the regional system to which it belongs.[4]

The concept is closely associated with that of a "security complex," understood as a set of states or units whose security dynamics are deeply interdependent, to the extent that their security problems cannot be adequately analyzed or resolved independently. This interdependence is typically driven by geographical proximity, overlapping threat perceptions and shared strategic concerns.[5]

The concept of regional security overlaps with that of a "security community," understood as a group of states that have reached a high level of coordination and shared understanding on security matters, underpinned by substantial mutual trust. Within such a framework, two core conditions are generally assumed: first, that member states possess diplomatic instruments or mechanisms enabling them to intervene early to prevent the outbreak of conflicts; and second, that they are capable of presenting a unified position or collective front in response to external actors, whether state or non-state.[6]

Within this framework, the concept is applicable to the security of the Arab states, which collectively form a regional system shaped by historical, cultural and social linkages, in addition to geographic contiguity. These states exhibit broadly convergent strategic interests and similar political and security challenges, thereby generating a degree of interdependence in their respective security environments.

Achieving stability is commonly regarded as the central objective of any regional security system. This involves preserving the prevailing political and security order, limiting abrupt or disruptive transformations and sustaining a workable balance of power and interests. Such stability is typically grounded in regional consensus and cooperative arrangements that can take different institutional forms, which may increase or decrease depending on aims, operational mechanisms and the evolving nature of perceived threats. Among the principal models are collective defense arrangements, in which states align with others that share their perception of a common or potential threat, with the aim of deterrence — particularly against direct military challenges to the sovereignty of any member. Another model is coordinated security, which tends to emerge in environments marked by rivalry but not full-scale conflict or structured cooperation; here, coordination itself becomes the main mechanism for sustaining limited security cooperation among regional actors. A third approach is cooperative security, based on jointly agreed regional norms of behavior that prioritize mutual security over purely individual concerns, extending cooperation beyond military issues to encompass a broader set of security-related domains.[7]

The Concept of Global Security

International security constitutes the most comprehensive tier of security, encompassing and transcending individual, national and regional levels. It relates to the protection of the institutions, norms, rules and values of the international community from a wide range of transnational threats, both military and non-military in nature.

Beyond its traditional military dimension, international security also incorporates political, economic, social and environmental components. In this respect, it overlaps with the broader concept of human security, reflecting the growing interdependence generated by globalization and the increasing interconnectedness of the international system, as well as of individuals and communities within it.

This heightened interdependence has produced a reality in which disturbances originating in the most vulnerable regions can generate spillover effects that reach even the most powerful actors, thereby undermining the possibility of any region remaining insulated from security risks emerging elsewhere in the international system.[8]

International security threats have become increasingly numerous, complex and interdependent. They are no longer confined to conventional interstate wars

or proxy conflicts between major and regional powers, but now include a wider spectrum of challenges such as transnational terrorism, prolonged regional conflicts, proliferation pressures involving weapons of mass destruction, cyberattacks, transnational organized crime, refugee flows and irregular migration, as well as ongoing competition among international and regional actors that contributes to sustained instability across various regions. Collectively, these threats affect state stability both directly and indirectly, by weakening internal security structures, eroding political systems and obstructing economic development through the production of persistently unstable political and security environments.[9]

The Relationship Between Political Stability and Security

There exists a close and reciprocal relationship between political stability and regional and international security, whereby both influence the other. In this sense, each functions simultaneously as a determinant and an outcome of the other.

The consolidation of domestic or national political stability often exerts a positive influence on the regional and international environment by reducing the likelihood of conflicts and violent disturbances that may spill over across borders. It also strengthens patterns of regional and international cooperation and integration, while enhancing states' capacity to contribute to collective security frameworks. This contribution may take the form of participation in regional and international security institutions, engagement in security coordination and intelligence-sharing mechanisms, or active involvement in mediation processes, conflict resolution initiatives and peacekeeping operations.

A notable illustration of this dynamic can be found in Western Europe, where a high degree of stability has been achieved. This stability has enabled states in the region to pursue long-term integration strategies, which in turn have further reinforced both domestic stability and broader regional and international security. In the European case, stability — largely shaped through the European Union's (EU) economic, diplomatic and security integration frameworks — has strengthened member states by converting historically adversarial relationships into structured and enduring institutional cooperation. It has helped establish conditions for economic growth, provided mechanisms for collective protection and supported the development of stable and peaceful inter-state relations across the continent. At the same time, the creation of supranational institutions has reduced the likelihood of conflict by deepening interdependence and enhancing coordination among member states in both political and security domains.[10]

In contrast, when political instability becomes entrenched within a state, its effects are rarely contained within national borders. Instead, they tend to extend outward into the surrounding regional environment through what is commonly described as spillover dynamics or regional contagion. Such instability often creates fertile conditions for transnational threats, including refugee movements, terrorism, insurgent activity and the trafficking of weapons and other

contraband. This pattern is evident in a number of cases, including Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen, as well as Syria prior to the attenuation of the crisis, where domestic instability has had pronounced repercussions for both regional and international security.

By contrast, regional and international environments that are relatively balanced and free from major security threats or disruptive external interference tend to create favorable conditions for domestic stability. By limiting cross-border risks and encouraging a more conducive setting for development, such environments can support internal consolidation.

The experience of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) illustrates this dynamic. Through mechanisms of regional cooperation, ASEAN has helped reduce the likelihood of conflict among its member states and has, since the late 1960s, contributed to a shift in the region from one marked by disputes and mutual mistrust toward a more cooperative framework. This transformation has, in turn, supported higher levels of political stability and sustained economic growth across much of its membership.[11]

Regional and international insecurity can weaken the stability of national regimes by generating both economic and political pressures, as well as through external interference. Such interventions may take direct forms, including support for internal rebel groups or armed factions, or indirect and covert forms, such as media disinformation campaigns, acts of sabotage within targeted states or assassinations of political figures and leaders. The overarching objective is typically to destabilize existing regimes or to reshape internal political balances in ways that serve the interests of external actors.

The stability and security of states are closely linked to the broader regional and international environment. A more stable and cooperative environment tends to expand opportunities for domestic stability, while regional conflicts and external interventions facilitate the cross-border transmission of threats and disrupt internal security balances. This pattern is reflected in multiple cases, including the Middle East, where the Arab-Israeli conflict has affected the political and security stability of regional states, and East Africa, where interstate tensions and conflicts have similarly influenced domestic stability.[12]

This is further illustrated by the situation in Syria during its crisis, where regional and international interventions, alongside competition among external powers, contributed to prolonging the conflict and intensifying economic, political and security pressures, thereby undermining internal stability. A comparable dynamic is observed in West Asia more broadly, where regional and international tensions and rivalries — including the Iran–Iraq War, the Second Gulf War, the US invasion of Iraq, Iranian interventions in the region and ultimately the US-Israel war against Iran — have heightened security threats and weakened stability across several countries in the region.

Transformations in the Syrian Landscape and Political Stability Post-Assad

The fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2014, marked a pivotal turning point that fundamentally reshaped the political landscape in Syria. This transformation encompassed wide-ranging changes affecting the governing system, internal power balances and the country's relations with its regional environment and the broader international community. As is often the case with major historical ruptures, these developments ushered Syria into a sensitive and complex transitional phase in which opportunities and challenges became closely intertwined.

While new prospects emerged for rebuilding the state on more participatory and equitable foundations, advancing development, ending international isolation and restoring Syria's regional and global standing, a set of profound dilemmas also came to the forefront. These challenges constitute a genuine test of the ability of various Syrian actors and constituencies to overcome the legacies of conflict, address sectarian and regional fragmentation and formulate a new social contract capable of securing national consensus, preserving state unity and reinforcing political stability.

Transitional Phase Interactions

From the earliest days following the collapse of the previous regime, the new administration moved to address the political vacuum created by the disintegration of existing state institutions. A caretaker government was established to oversee the management of state affairs, while Ahmed al-Sharaa was appointed president for the transitional period with the mandate to form a temporary legislative council. This process followed the dissolution of the People's Assembly, the annulment of the previous constitution and the promulgation of a new constitutional declaration. A high-level electoral commission was subsequently established, and general elections were conducted to form the legislative council.

At the same time, intensive societal and political discussions emerged concerning the trajectory of the transition. The National Dialogue Conference was convened as a platform intended to facilitate dialogue among the various Syrian political, military and social components, enabling them to articulate their demands and perspectives in pursuit of a consensual vision for the country's future. The conference also aimed to formulate a clear roadmap for addressing critical national issues and threats to civil and social peace.[13] Parallel to this process, trials involving figures and officials associated with the former regime commenced as an initial step toward the implementation of transitional justice mechanisms.[14]

On the security front, the army and all security agencies affiliated with the former regime — across their various branches and structures — were dissolved, together with the militias established under its authority. A new security institution was subsequently formed, while efforts began to dismantle armed factions and revolutionary political and civil entities, with the objective of integrating them into formal state institutions.[15]

In the sphere of foreign relations, Syria experienced a substantial transformation in its external orientation. A new phase of diplomatic and economic openness emerged, accompanied by an accelerating restoration of relations with numerous regional and international actors. Particularly notable was the role of Saudi Arabia, whose efforts contributed to the lifting of US sanctions on Syria — readmitting Syria into the international community as an important actor for regional security and stability — and encouraged other states to reestablish diplomatic relations with Damascus and declare support for the new authorities. This development contributed to Syria's gradual reintegration into regional and international frameworks. The process also coincided with the strengthening of relations between Syria and Türkiye, alongside a marked decline in Russian influence and the near-total erosion of Iranian clout within the Syrian arena.[16]

In this context, the visit of Syrian President Sharaa to the United States marked a significant turning point, as it constituted the first official visit by a Syrian head of state to Washington since Syria's independence. It also signaled Washington's intention to support the new leadership, facilitate Syria's normalization of relations with Western countries, open pathways for international investment and encourage its participation in regional alliances.[17]

On the economic front, indicators of a relative recovery began to emerge following the easing of sanctions —especially those imposed on the Assad regime under the Caesar Act[18] — and the inflow of Arab and international investments, particularly from Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Both countries supported the Syrian energy sector[19] and provided joint financing to the new authorities with the aim of reinforcing economic stability and advancing reconstruction efforts.[20]

Alongside these positive political, security, diplomatic and economic developments, the Syrian arena also experienced a number of serious tensions and security challenges. Most notably, violent clashes erupted between government forces and elements loyal to the former regime in the predominantly Alawite coastal region. Additional confrontations took place in the Suwaida region involving Druze militias, Bedouin tribal fighters and government forces, with Israel intervening under the pretext of protecting the Druze minority.

At the same time, repeated clashes occurred in the eastern regions between the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and government forces.

These tensions represented a significant test for the new Syrian authorities and exposed the scale and complexity of the challenges associated with the broader process of state-building and the consolidation of political stability.

State Building and Challenges

The process of political transition and state-building in Syria faces a complex array of challenges, most notably the following:

- **Reconciliation and transitional justice**: The Syrian conflict has deepened societal fragmentation and generated extensive cycles of violence, resulting in large numbers of deaths, disappearances and displacement. This reality

necessitates substantial efforts aimed at restoring social cohesion and reinforcing civil peace through a comprehensive framework of reconciliation and transitional justice. Such an approach extends beyond the prosecution of those responsible for violations and abuses to include reparations for victims and the reform of the institutions implicated in these injustices.

- **Reform of state institutions**: Under the previous regime, state institutions were widely characterized by inefficiency, weak accountability, entrenched corruption and patronage networks, and a limited capacity to respond to the basic demands of society. Consequently, these institutions require deep structural reform encompassing both institutional and administrative reforms, with the objective of strengthening integrity, enhancing institutional independence and improving the state's capacity to formulate and implement effective public policies.[21]
- **Strengthening security and preventing a return to widespread violence**: This challenge concerns the capacity of the ruling authorities to extend effective control across all Syrian territory, consolidate the state's monopoly over the legitimate use of force and reform the security sector. Central to this issue is the integration of armed factions into the official security establishment, one of the most sensitive and complex dimensions of the broader state-rebuilding process. Years of conflict have produced a large number of armed groups characterized by diverse loyalties and ideological orientations. Some factions —such as the SDF in northeastern Syria and certain Druze formations in the Suwaida region — continue to seek varying degrees of autonomy or localized influence.[22]
- **Reconstruction and economic recovery**: The reconstruction of Syria and the restoration of economic activity following years of devastating civil war constitute a major challenge extending far beyond the economic dimension to encompass complex political and administrative considerations. The country has experienced widespread destruction of infrastructure, deterioration across virtually all economic sectors and a shortage of qualified personnel resulting from displacement and migration. These conditions render the process of economic recovery both slow and highly demanding.
- **Formation of a unified national identity**: The prolonged conflict deepened sectarian, ethnic and regional divisions, weakened social cohesion and eroded the broader sense of shared national belonging. As a result, the construction of a unified national identity in post-war Syria has emerged as one of the most difficult dimensions of the state-building process. Debate has intensified over the foundational character of the future state — whether primarily Islamic or secular — as well as over its structural organization. This debate places advocates of decentralization, who regard it as a mechanism for ensuring equitable representation of Syria's diverse social groups, in opposition to supporters of a centralized state model who fear the fragmentation of the national entity.

Addressing this challenge requires the formulation of a new social contract grounded in the principle of equal citizenship as the basis for rights and obligations, transcending narrow communal and regional loyalties. It also necessitates the development of an inclusive national discourse that redefines identity based on participation, acceptance of diversity and pluralism and peaceful political competition within a framework of mutual respect.

Political Stability in Syria: Realities and Indicators

The Syrian political transition has entered its most delicate and consequential phase following the collapse of the previous regime. Transitional periods of this nature are typically characterized by heightened fragility, as the process of rebuilding state institutions unfolds before a new political order has fully consolidated. In Syria's case, institutional vacuums have intersected with escalating and often competing societal expectations, while political and social forces continue to contest the shape of the emerging order and the future distribution of power, influence and resources. Such conditions are commonly accompanied by weak institutional capacity, fluctuating security conditions, economic hardship and shifting sources of political legitimacy, rendering stability provisional and vulnerable to reversal in the event of major crises.

The challenge confronting Syria extends beyond addressing the legacies of the former regime or pursuing reconciliation and transitional justice. It also involves redefining the social contract governing relations between the state and society on new foundations rooted in participation, accountability, equality and justice. Consequently, any mismanagement of the transitional process — whether through excessive haste or prolonged delay — risks reproducing conflict in new forms. The Syrian transition therefore constitutes a critical test of the ability of the ruling authorities and emerging institutions to transform political fragility into sustainable stability and to convert transitional legitimacy into enduring legitimacy capable of securing both political and societal order.

Against the backdrop of the dynamics and challenges shaping this transitional period, it becomes evident that, despite the persistence of risks linked to security tensions, incomplete institutional consolidation and disagreements among political and social actors, Syria's political stability appears comparatively improved relative to the previous phase. This development is tied to indicators of the gradual normalization of public life and the country's slow transition from a revolutionary environment toward a state-building process.

This relative improvement in Syria's political stability is reflected in several indicators:

- **Decline in manifestations of political violence**: The reduction in political violence — in terms of frequency, intensity, geographical scope, the diversity of actors involved and the number of casualties resulting from armed attacks — constitutes a composite indicator of improving political stability in Syria. The decline in armed confrontations, terrorist attacks, political assassinations,

arrests and enforced disappearances; the transformation of sectarian and social protests into comparatively peaceful and disciplined forms of expression; the dissolution or integration of numerous militias into the official military structure; and the emergence of indications that the restructured security apparatus is beginning to establish a legitimate monopoly over the use of force all point to a gradual transition from the logic of coercion to that of institutionalization, reflecting a relative decline in instability.

Despite notable exceptions — particularly the disturbances and violent incidents witnessed in the coastal region, in Suwaida, and in the eastern areas, in addition to sporadic retaliatory assassinations and acts of violence — these developments, while serious, remain limited in scope and insignificant when compared with the scale of widespread political violence that accompanied the civil war, which represented the height of instability and the collapse of security in the country.[23]

- **Improved effectiveness of political institutions**: The relative improvement in the performance of Syria's reconstituted political institutions represents an important indicator of the consolidation of the country's new political order. Gradually, the state has begun to recover some of its defining institutional characteristics, as several public institutions have resumed their core functions after years of deterioration and fragmentation. In coordination with local administrations and civil councils, the central authorities have managed to restore and reorganize essential public services — including education, healthcare, electricity and communication — in numerous areas despite severe resource constraints.

  Although indicators of institutional fragility remain evident, this partial recovery is also reflected in the state's ability to manage emerging economic and social crises, including the fuel shortage crisis and rising prices of basic commodities, alongside efforts to restructure and reform the financial and banking sectors. These developments suggest the gradual emergence of public institutions that are more adaptable and increasingly capable of transitioning from emergency crisis management toward the restoration of relatively normal administrative governance.
- **Relative expansion of political participation**: Since the fall of the previous regime, Syria has witnessed a relative expansion in political participation. Within this context, the country held what were widely regarded as its first genuinely competitive elections in more than half a century in October 2025. Under the Assad regime, elections had largely functioned as procedural formalities devoid of meaningful competition or transparency.[24] Although the electoral process remained incomplete due to delays in the governorates of Hasakah, Raqqa and Suwaida, the elections nonetheless represented a significant step toward establishing the foundations of political participation and pluralism after decades of authoritarian rule,[25] thereby constituting an important indicator of relative political stability.

- **Expansion of state authority across different regions**: The extension of the new Syrian government's authority over various parts of the country, particularly eastern regions previously controlled by Kurdish forces, constitutes another important indicator of post-conflict stabilization. On January 29, 2026, the Syrian government and the SDF signed an agreement providing for the integration of the Autonomous Administration's institutions into state structures, as well as the incorporation of Kurdish fighters into the Syrian army and security services. This development reflects a transition from fragmented authority toward the reunification of sovereign institutions under a single central government, while simultaneously recognizing Kurdish rights and facilitating Kurdish participation within the state framework.[26] Such measures could reduce fragmentation, diminish the risk of renewed armed confrontation through the consolidation of weapons under state authority and reinforce broader national cohesion.
- **Rising political legitimacy**: Political legitimacy remains one of the most significant indicators of political stability and a central prerequisite for its sustainability. No political regime can realistically ensure continuity and stability without securing an adequate degree of legitimacy. Conversely, political systems often become unstable — and may ultimately collapse — when their legitimacy experiences severe erosion at either the domestic or international level.

  In this context, the new Syrian regime has strengthened its stability by acquiring a reasonable degree of domestic legitimacy through the support of relatively broad social sectors, particularly groups and political forces that had previously experienced marginalization or repression. This support has not been driven solely by political or sectarian considerations, despite the fact that the new governing forces largely emerge from the Sunni majority. Rather, it also derives from the reality that many of the dominant political organizations within the new order were formed within the framework of the popular uprising against the former regime, thereby granting the new authorities a considerable degree of revolutionary legitimacy.

  At the external level, the new Syrian government has also gained substantial legitimacy through recognition, acceptance, and support from a wide range of regional and international actors, including Arab states, Türkiye, the United States, EU states and other international actors and organizations. This legitimacy has stemmed from the government's demonstrated willingness to cooperate on issues related to regional security and counterterrorism, as well as from its openness to Arab and international diplomatic initiatives that helped end Syria's previous isolation and facilitated its reintegration into the regional and international system.
- **Decline of negative foreign interventions**: Negative foreign interventions constitute one of the principal factors undermining political stability and security. Such interventions are frequently aimed at reshaping domestic polit-

ical balances in ways that serve the interests of external actors, expand their influence or generate instability and tension within the targeted state, thereby adversely affecting the stability and security of the surrounding regional environment.

In Syria, negative foreign interventions constituted one of the principal factors undermining stability during the previous phase of the conflict. The interventions of Iran and Russia contributed to escalating tensions, intensifying the conflict, deepening sectarian and regional divisions and weakening prospects for stability. Rather than facilitating a comprehensive national settlement, both states reinforced the predominance of military solutions at the expense of a genuine political resolution. The Assad regime had relied heavily on the military and political backing provided by Iran and Russia to preserve its rule, reducing its willingness to undertake meaningful reforms or engage in substantive power-sharing arrangements with the opposition.

Iran, for its part, expanded its sectarian and political influence through affiliated militias and sought to reshape demographic balances in certain Syrian regions, thereby exacerbating societal divisions and weakening the concept of a unified national identity. Russia, meanwhile, utilized its military and political intervention to reshape the geopolitical landscape and expand its influence in the Eastern Mediterranean, effectively imposing a model of stability through coercive force. This intervention transformed the Assad regime into a fragile structure dependent on external powers and turned Syria into an arena for regional and international rivalry. As a result, the conflict was prolonged, prospects for building unified national institutions were weakened, and the possibility of achieving genuine political stability was significantly undermined.

With regional dynamics and balances increasingly shifting against Iran — particularly following intensified Israeli and US strikes during the 12-Day War in June 2025 and the subsequent war that erupted in February 2026 — alongside Russia's growing preoccupation with the war in Ukraine and the success of Syrian opposition forces in overthrowing the regime, Iranian influence in Syria declined substantially. Russia's role also became increasingly confined to safeguarding its strategic military bases in Syrian territory. These developments contributed to a reduction in instability by diminishing the intensity of polarization and military competition for influence within Syria. They also provided the new Syrian authorities with greater opportunities to consolidate state authority, regain a degree of political independence and distance themselves from regional alliance politics — thus preventing Syria from turning into an active front in the US-Israel war against Iran. Furthermore, the decline in foreign intervention helped reduce armed tensions and weaken the influence of foreign-backed militias, thereby creating conditions more conducive to balanced internal settlements. In this sense, the decline of external interference represented an important step toward establishing a more stable political environment.

More broadly, negative foreign interventions in Syria have declined overall, despite certain notable exceptions. The most significant among these remains Israeli intervention targeting Syrian military capabilities, penetrating or occupying some border areas, and supporting the Druze minority. These actions appear primarily aimed at weakening Syria's strategic capabilities to prevent it from posing a future threat to Israel.

Conversely, positive external interventions — particularly those undertaken by Saudi Arabia and Qatar — contributed to reinforcing the trajectory of political stability in Syria following the fall of the Assad regime. Both countries adopted an approach centered on supporting emerging national institutions and financing reconstruction projects and essential public services, including education, healthcare and infrastructure. These efforts helped ease the economic and social pressures resulting from years of conflict, thereby reducing the likelihood of renewed instability. In addition, the two states played a role in facilitating dialogue among Syrian political actors with the aim of promoting national reconciliation and fostering political consensus. This contributed to creating conditions conducive to the gradual restoration of Syria's political and diplomatic legitimacy. Türkiye enhanced cooperation between regional and international actors to support the political transition and safeguard the unity and stability of Syria.

In this sense, such interventions served as an important stabilizing factor, helping transform Syria from a deeply volatile conflict arena with severe cross-border repercussions into an environment increasingly oriented toward political and economic recovery, with positive implications for both regional and international stability and security. These developments confirm that stability is the bedrock of successful development programs. Riyadh has chosen the path of stability, in stark contrast to the strategy of exploiting chaos and instability — an approach Iran pursued during the Assad era to expand its regional influence, and which Israel later adopted to consolidate its dominance in the region.

The Impact of Political Stability on Syrian Security

It is evident that the repercussions of political transformations in Syria extend beyond the domestic sphere, owing to Syria's geostrategic position as a connecting point between the Arabian Peninsula, the Eastern Mediterranean, Türkiye, Europe and North Africa. This grants Syria a pivotal role within the regional security structure of the Middle East, such that both instability and stability within the country are inevitably reflected in its immediate regional environment — particularly the Arab states and Türkiye — as well as in the broader international environment, especially among actors heavily affected by regional developments, including European countries.

Accordingly, improvements in indicators of political stability in Syria are likely to generate positive effects on both regional and international security. These effects are particularly evident in interconnected issues such as cross-border se-

curity threats, including terrorism and organized crime; the refugee crisis and its repercussions for host countries; regional and international security and economic integration; and the broader balance of power and competition for influence among regional and international actors in the Middle East.

Curbing Cross-border Security Threats

In the preceding period, prior to the fall of the Assad regime, Syria constituted a major hub of security risks and a source of multiple threats extending to its immediate neighbors — Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Türkiye — as well as to its more distant regional surroundings, including the Gulf states. The erosion of state institutions and the emergence of competing centers of authority transformed Syrian territory into an open arena for transnational terrorist organizations, which exploited the security vacuum to recruit fighters and launch cross-border attacks. This threat reached its peak with the expansion of ISIS operations across eastern Syria and western Iraq, generating a serious challenge to both regional and international security. At the same time, organized crime networks and the smuggling of arms and narcotics expanded significantly, in some cases benefiting from elements within the former regime, turning Syria into a sustained source of pressure on regional national security systems.

With the end of the crisis, the gradual improvement in Syria's political and security stability has led to a marked reduction in cross-border threats and risks that previously preoccupied neighboring states. As state institutions regained a degree of effectiveness and the widespread security breakdown of the conflict years subsided, the operational capacity of terrorist organizations to move freely within Syrian territory or use it as a base for attacks against neighboring countries was significantly curtailed. Enhanced control over border crossings further contributed to limiting the activities of organized crime networks and reducing the smuggling of weapons, drugs and human trafficking. Collectively, these developments helped restore a greater degree of order to the security environment and contained the spread of non-traditional threats across the region.

Easing Tensions Emerging From the Refugee Crisis

The Syrian refugee crisis, which intensified during the years of the Assad regime, had severe repercussions for host countries both in the immediate region and in Europe, and came to represent one of the largest displacement waves in modern history. In Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Türkiye and Egypt, the influx of millions of refugees placed heavy pressure on already strained infrastructure and public services, including education, healthcare, housing and utilities. This weakened the capacity of these states to meet domestic needs and contributed to rising unemployment and poverty in local communities, partly due to increased labor market competition.

In addition, refugee inflows disrupted existing social balances and deepened internal divisions, particularly in countries such as Lebanon and Türkiye, while

also generating political and security tensions fueled by populist rhetoric and anti-refugee sentiment.[27] In Europe, the crisis became a major challenge for European policies on migration, security and integration, contributing to the rise of populist and far-right movements, as well as disputes over the distribution of humanitarian and security responsibilities.[28] In this sense, the refugee crisis extended beyond a humanitarian dimension to become a broad structural phenomenon that reshaped social and political dynamics across many countries in the Arab region and beyond.

With the end of the war in Syria and the gradual improvement in political and security stability, a qualitative shift occurred in the trajectory of the refugee crisis, which had persisted for more than a decade. The reduction in conflict intensity and the restoration of state control over large parts of Syrian territory contributed to the cessation of large-scale displacement flows toward neighboring countries and created more favorable conditions for the gradual and voluntary return of significant numbers of refugees to their areas of origin. Since December 8, 2024, nearly 1.6 million Syrian refugees have returned home from neighboring countries and beyond as of April 2026. In parallel, approximately 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their regions of origin.[29] This development had direct implications for host countries — particularly Lebanon, Jordan and Türkiye — which faced mounting economic and social pressures due to the prolonged presence of large refugee populations.

As the number of Syrian residents in these countries declined, a relative easing of pressure on public service systems began to emerge, along with a partial reduction in social tensions linked to employment competition and resource allocation. Although the return of refugees remains limited and they face significant socioeconomic obstacles, the broader trend toward greater stability within Syria suggests the early stages of a gradual decline in one of the most complex displacement crises in the region and globally. This shift is likely to have positive implications for regional and international security by reducing the tensions and instability associated with prolonged displacement, as well as mitigating risks linked to extremism and transnational crime that often develop in contexts of protracted refugee conditions.

Creating the Conditions for Security and Economic Integration

The gradual consolidation of political stability in Syria constitutes a strategic entry point for advancing broader Arab security integration, with the potential to extend into wider regional and international frameworks of security and economic interdependence. As Syrian state institutions progressively recover their functional capacity, conditions become more conducive to integrating Syria into the regional security architecture and strengthening coordination with other actors to address and mitigate shared threats.

This evolving context also provides a supportive environment for deeper regional stability, which is a necessary prerequisite for large-scale economic inte-

gration initiatives. Such initiatives include the development of energy and gas pipeline networks and the establishment of free trade zones, as well as land and maritime transport corridors linking the Levant and Gulf states with Türkiye and the Eastern Mediterranean, ultimately extending toward Europe through Syrian territory, which occupies a pivotal geographical position between these regions. The realization of these projects would generate a significant development transformation and improve economic and social conditions, thereby reinforcing security in its broader political, economic and social dimensions. At the same time, it would deepen interdependence among participating states, encouraging coordinated action for their collective security.

These integrated projects have started to take shape, fueled by the increasing awareness of Syria's critical role as a secure connector between the region and global markets — an alternative that avoids risky chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, exploited by Iran as a tool of leverage, and the Bab al-Mandab Strait, which remains vulnerable to instability in Yemen and the Horn of Africa.

The initial phase of such integrated projects reportedly began with Iraq's commencement of oil exports via Syria in April 2026, following disruptions to supply routes through the Strait of Hormuz amid the US-Israel war on Iran. Plans envisaged the export of approximately 2.5 million barrels of oil per day through a proposed pipeline connecting Basra and Haditha, with three export routes extending to the Syrian port of Banias, the Turkish port of Ceyhan and the Jordanian port of Aqaba.(30)

The Gulf states have also begun transporting oil and other goods overland through Syria to cargo ships. In parallel, efforts are underway to revive infrastructure and economic projects that were damaged or suspended during the civil war — most notably the Arab Gas Pipeline, designed to carry natural gas from Egypt to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria. These initiatives form part of the new Syrian leadership's strategy to position the country as a vital link in regional and global supply chains.(31) Additionally, the UAE has significantly increased its investments in Syrian ports, particularly following recent disruptions in Gulf navigation and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. This aligns with the UAE's broader strategy, which views Syrian ports as key nodes in its regional logistics network and aims to integrate Syria into the network of commercial corridors it is developing across the Middle East and the Horn of Africa.(32)

Regional Equilibrium and the Decline of Global Competition Over Influence

The gradual improvement in political stability in Syria constitutes a key factor in easing regional competition for influence. It helps reduce the polarization that intensified throughout the years of conflict and alleviates tensions generated by proxy wars that had turned Syria into an arena of rivalry among multiple regional and international actors. As the Syrian state progressively restores its sovereignty and stabilizes its internal situation, the necessity for both direct and indirect foreign intervention diminishes, opening space for a more balanced

and pragmatic relationship among regional powers, including Arab states, Iran, Türkiye and Israel, while reducing the risk of mutual escalation.

This stabilization also contributes to a recalibration of the geopolitical order in the Eastern Mediterranean, which had been significantly disrupted by the expansion of Iranian and Russian influence during the conflict, prompting heightened US involvement in response. Accordingly, Syria's movement toward stability supports a broader adjustment in regional power relations, strengthens prospects for collective security, helps prevent the recurrence of conflict and encourages a more stable and cooperative trajectory within the international system.

Conclusion

The fall of the Assad regime represented a historic watershed, ushering in a fragile transitional phase that reshaped internal power dynamics and repositioned Syria within both regional and international frameworks. In the midst of this transformation, the new governing authority confronted a wide array of challenges, including the need for reconciliation and transitional justice, the restructuring of state institutions, the reinforcement of security and prevention of renewed violence, reconstruction and economic recovery and the construction of an inclusive national identity capable of transcending sectarian and regional divisions.

Despite the magnitude of these challenges, Syria has registered tangible progress, most notably a relative strengthening of political stability. This is evidenced by several key indicators, including a reduction in political violence, partial improvements in institutional performance, an increase in political legitimacy and a decline in negative external interference. This development has had positive spillover effects on the broader regional and international environment, contributing to a reduction in cross-border security threats, easing pressures associated with the refugee crisis in host countries and creating more conducive conditions for regional security and economic integration among Arab states and neighboring countries. It has also contributed to a recalibration of geopolitical balances and a moderation of international competition for influence in the region.

Nevertheless, the consolidation of this trajectory remains dependent on the ability of Syrians to reinforce national consensus, as well as on sustained regional and international support for the political transition and the prevention of any reversal. Ultimately, Syria's ability to entrench stability would not only constitute a domestic achievement but also a significant contribution and support to regional and international security. This is because Syria's success can energize local, regional and international efforts to address tensions and crises in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Libya, Sudan and Somalia — helping to pull the region out of the protracted cycle of violence toward stability, cooperation, integration and development.

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Received	Accepted	Published
December 21, 2025	April 23, 2026	June 17, 2026

RUSSIA-AFRICA RELATIONS: COOPERATION PROSPECTS AND PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The African continent has increasingly emerged as a major arena of competition among international powers and actors, driven by economic, geopolitical and military considerations. This growing rivalry is closely linked to Africa's vast natural resources and strategic potential, which have become central to long-term plans for expanding global influence. Against this backdrop, the study analyzes the trajectory of Russia-Africa relations and partnership from the launch of the Russia–Africa Summit to the Ministerial Conference held in Cairo in November 2025. It further evaluates the development of this partnership amid the successive regional and international transformations and challenges that have shaped the period under examination.

The study concludes that Russia's role and influence across the African continent have grown considerably despite the mounting challenges confronting policymakers in the Kremlin and the broader political and strategic environment that has evolved within African states over the past decade.

Keywords: Russia, Africa, Sochi Summit, Russia-Africa Partnership.

Introduction

Throughout successive historical eras, the international system has undergone profound structural transformations that have reshaped the nature of global political interactions and power relations. In the aftermath of the Cold War and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, substantial academic literature emerged seeking to define Russia's evolving regional and international role. This literature focused in particular on Moscow's efforts to restore equilibrium within the global balance of power and to reassert its strategic influence, both within its traditional spheres of influence and across emerging geostrategic regions of growing international importance.

Within this context, the African continent has increasingly become a major arena of geopolitical competition and strategic engagement among global powers seeking to expand their economic, political and military influence. Over the past decade, Africa has occupied a central position in Russian foreign policy calculations, with Moscow adopting diversified mechanisms of engagement aimed at deepening influence, consolidating partnerships and capitalizing on the continent's ongoing geopolitical transformation.

Against this backdrop, the paper examines the evolution of the Russia-Africa partnership by tracing its principal institutional and political milestones, beginning with the Sochi Summit in 2019 and extending to the Ministerial Conference held in Cairo in December 2025. The paper seeks to identify the defining characteristics of this partnership, assess its strategic dimensions and evaluate the prospects for future cooperation and influence in both the short and long term.

Accordingly, the paper addresses several central research questions: What are the principal determinants shaping Russian foreign policy toward African countries? What are the primary areas of mutual interest underpinning the Russia-Africa partnership? And what are the future prospects for cooperation between Russia and African countries amid ongoing regional and international transformations?

To address these questions, the paper proceeds from the central premise that Russia seeks to institutionalize and consolidate long-term structural relations with African partners while simultaneously capitalizing on the relative decline of European and US influence across the continent in ways that advance the broader economic and security interests of the Russian Federation.

The paper adopts a multidimensional theoretical framework grounded primarily in the assumptions of structural realism, employing this approach to interpret Moscow's efforts to fill the strategic vacuum left by traditional external actors in Africa and to position itself as a provider of more reliable political, economic and security solutions for African countries.

In methodological terms, the paper also employs a comparative analytical approach to examine the principal developments and transformations that have shaped Russia-Africa relations from the convening of the Sochi Summit in 2019 through to the second Ministerial Conference held in Cairo in December 2025.

Through this framework, the paper further seeks to formulate forward-looking assessments regarding the future trajectory and strategic nature of the Russia-Africa partnership.

Africa in Russia's Foreign Policy Calculus

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has sought to reclaim the Soviet Union's former political and strategic stature while expanding its geopolitical role across broader regional and international arenas in a manner commensurate with the Russian Federation's growing military and economic capabilities. Within this context, Keir Giles attempts to relativize Russia's ambitions by drawing on the well-known observation made by former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson two decades after the Second World War, when he remarked that Great Britain had "lost an empire and has not yet found a role.[1]" Giles applies this analogy to the Russian case, despite the significant differences separating the two historical experiences, particularly given Moscow's explicit efforts to reconstruct and expand its global influence rather than merely redefine its international position. In this regard, the African continent has emerged as one of the principal strategic arenas through which Russia seeks to restore and consolidate its international influence. This dynamic unfolds amid intensifying competition with other major powers seeking to expand and reinforce their political, economic and security presence across Africa, thereby transforming the continent into a central theater of contemporary geopolitical rivalry.

Historically, scholars generally divide Russia-Africa relations into three principal phases preceding the contemporary era of what is now described as "strategic partnership." The first phase extends to the period prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917.[2] During this stage, academic attention is often directed toward the initiatives of Peter the Great, particularly his efforts to dispatch exploratory missions to Madagascar beginning in 1723, alongside attempts to expand religious missionary activity through Orthodox missions in Ethiopia and Coptic-linked missionary networks in the Holy Land.

In parallel, Russian scholarly narratives concerning Africa frequently reflect a distinct symbolic and ideological framing designed to emphasize the exceptional character of Russia-Africa relations and to differentiate them from the historical experience of Western colonial powers. Within this context, Alexander Mezyaev argues that although the Russian Empire participated in the Berlin Conference of 1855 —which effectively provided the legal and political framework for European colonial expansion across Africa[3] — it was not, in his assessment, a direct actor in the territorial partition of the continent.

Mezyaev further highlights Russia's early diplomatic engagement with Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia in 1898, including Russian support aimed at countering Italian expansionist ambitions in the Horn of Africa.[4] The same year also witnessed the establishment of a Russian general consulate in the Moroccan city of Tangier.[5] Moreover, Russia adopted a strong oppositional stance toward

the project to establish a German colonial sphere in Morocco in 1911, reinforcing Moscow's effort to portray itself as distinct from the dominant colonial practices pursued by European powers during that period.

During the Soviet era, Moscow's foreign policy orientations toward African countries evolved in response to successive geopolitical transformations unfolding across both Africa and Europe. Within this broader context, several distinct Soviet approaches to engagement with African political actors and liberation movements can be identified.

In the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution, the Soviet leadership under Vladimir Lenin viewed European colonial spheres as strategic arenas through which Western imperial influence could be challenged and weakened. Soviet strategy during this period relied on exploiting the rise of anti-colonial nationalist sentiments in Africa while simultaneously strengthening communist movements and leftist political currents in Europe. This approach gained additional momentum amid the economic and political disruptions associated with the Great Depression, particularly after the Soviet leadership had launched the "United Front from Below" campaign aimed at mobilizing anti-imperialist and leftist forces across both Africa and Europe.(6)

Subsequently, during the phase of Soviet strategic retrenchment and the reconstruction of its regional and international outlook — extending from World War II until the mid-1950s — Moscow sought to recalibrate its relations with major Western powers, particularly France and the UK, while continuing to endorse and support anti-colonial liberation movements across Africa. This orientation became more pronounced following the Bandung Conference of 1955, especially as the rise of fascism and Nazism in Europe had earlier been perceived by Soviet leaders as an existential threat to communist ideology and the broader socialist project.(7)

During the 1960s and 1970s, Soviet policy increasingly concentrated on the broad spectrum of newly independent African countries, as this period witnessed the liberation of more than 30 African countries from European colonial domination.(8) Within this rapidly changing geopolitical environment, decision-makers in the Kremlin sought to enhance economic engagement with African partners by prioritizing tangible commercial and strategic gains over rigid ideological considerations.(9) At the same time, Moscow worked to preserve and deepen its global influence amid the intensifying dynamics of the Cold War, viewing Africa as a critical arena for consolidating political alliances, expanding economic cooperation and reinforcing Soviet international standing. These efforts continued until the eventual collapse of the Eastern Bloc and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

In the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia-Africa relations entered a prolonged phase of stagnation and marked decline, particularly amid the fragmentation of communist and leftist ideological currents across Africa and the parallel rise of liberal capitalist orientations throughout the continent. At

the same time, the profound political and economic challenges associated with rebuilding the Russian Federation as the successor state to the dissolved Soviet Union compelled the Kremlin to prioritize domestic restructuring and state consolidation over expansive external engagement.

During this period, Russian policy was largely centered on reinforcing the principle of national sovereignty and strengthening the political and economic foundations of the internal state apparatus.[10] As a result, Moscow's engagement with Africa remained limited for nearly a decade and a half.

However, by 2014, the Russian leadership began adopting more assertive and strategically oriented policies toward the African continent, laying the foundations for what Moscow increasingly described as a phase of "partnership" with African countries. This shift coincided with the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation and the subsequent deterioration of relations between Russia and Western powers.

Seeking Influence and Laying the Foundations of a New Strategic Partnership

For Russian foreign policy and decision-making circles, efforts to expand and consolidate the Kremlin's influence across the African continent over the long term are driven by a range of interconnected determinants and motivations. These motivations extend beyond the purely economic and commercial dimension, although economic engagement itself constitutes one of the principal instruments through which Moscow seeks to strengthen its position amid intensifying competition with other major powers active in Africa.

In this context, questions continue to surround the credibility and effectiveness of many economic indicators related to African economies, whose overall performance remains below their available potential despite the continent accounting for nearly 17% of the world's population. Africa contributes only around 2% of global manufacturing output and no more than 4% of global trade.[11] This is in addition to the growing burden of external debt, which reached approximately $685 billion in 2023, thereby affecting the prospects for economic cooperation and partnership with African countries.[12] At the continental level, projections issued by the African Union (AU) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development anticipated that Africa's annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate would reach 3.5% in 2024 before rising to 4% by the end of 2025,[13] reflecting what remains a relatively slow and insufficient pace of economic expansion. Nevertheless, despite these structural challenges, the African continent continues to represent a major arena for the expansion and diversification of international influence due to the wide range of opportunities it offers for cooperation and partnership across multiple strategic sectors.

Many scholars examining Russia-Africa relations argue that the Kremlin, after decades of adhering to approaches resembling the Chinese model — particularly through policies emphasizing distance and non-interference in the internal

affairs of states within the post-Soviet international order — has, over the past two decades, adopted more open and flexible strategic perceptions increasingly detached from the ideological legacy of the Soviet era.[14]

Within this context, Agnieszka Paczyńska argues that Moscow has sought to promote a model positioning itself as a "savior alternative" for fragile and unstable countries, particularly in Africa. According to her assessment, Russian involvement in African electoral processes, alongside policies aimed at ending the international isolation of military-led governments that had overthrown existing political authorities and providing such regimes with diplomatic and political cover,[15] created new entry points for expanding Russian influence and establishing unprecedented forms of what Moscow describes as "strategic" cooperation and partnership with African countries.

These policies have enabled Russia to present itself as an alternative partner to competing international actors, particularly European powers and the broader Western bloc, within a geopolitical environment increasingly characterized by renewed competition over spheres of influence reminiscent of the rivalries that once defined relations between the Eastern and Western blocs during the Cold War.

There is no doubt that Africa is increasingly emerging as a theater for proxy wars among the great powers. In this struggle, Russia relies heavily on private military security companies. These companies, foremost among them the Wagner Group, provide Moscow with a wide range of services, including intelligence gathering, military training, logistical support, protection of allied governments and assistance to rebel groups. The influence of these groups, particularly Wagner, has been strikingly evident in the Sahel region — notably in Mali, the Central African Republic, Niger, Chad and Libya — as well as in Sudan's civil conflict. By depending on such companies, Russia is able to distance itself from controversial actions while maintaining a foothold in these strategically vital areas. In addition to military influence, Russia derives substantial gains from these activities, including the strengthening of its security footprint, access to vital natural resources and the ability to offer African countries an alternative to diminishing Western assistance.

After decades of fluctuating Russian policy toward Africa, discussions surrounding the establishment of a Russia-Africa "partnership" and the search for a sustained strategic foothold on the continent have steadily gained momentum, particularly amid intensifying international competition in Africa. Within this context, any examination of the transformation in the nature of the Russia-Africa partnership necessarily begins with the Russia–Africa Summit held in Sochi from October 23 – October 24, 2019, which remains one of the most prominent milestones in the evolution of relations between the two sides.

Organized under the slogan "For Peace, Security and Development," the summit witnessed unprecedented African participation, including the attendance of 43 African heads of state, while 11 additional African countries were represented

by vice presidents, foreign ministers and ambassadors. The event also brought together representatives of major continental and regional organizations and institutions. The summit resulted in the signing of numerous memoranda of understanding whose combined value exceeded $12.5 billion.[16] Its significance stemmed not only from the scale of participation, but also from the timing of its convening, the agenda it adopted and the outcomes it produced, all of which collectively positioned Russia-Africa relations at the threshold of what was widely viewed as a major strategic turning point.

Russia's motivations for deepening its partnership with the African continent were not confined to the pursuit of economic and commercial opportunities, despite studies at the time indicating that Africa had accumulated nearly $46 trillion in total wealth between 2010 and 2019. Rather, Moscow's approach also reflected an effort to mitigate the diplomatic isolation and Western sanctions imposed on Russia following the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation in 2014.

Within this context, the Kremlin sought to break its international isolation by strengthening relations with African states and securing the support of an influential voting bloc within international institutions. This calculation was particularly significant given that the African continent comprises 54 internationally recognized countries within the UN, collectively representing nearly one-third of the votes in the UN General Assembly.[17] Over the past two decades, Moscow has increasingly benefited from this strategy through the steady expansion of its relations with African countries and, more importantly, through the growing acceptance of Russia's new political, economic and security roles and interventions across the continent.

It is important to note that the summit sought from the outset to establish periodic and institutionalized mechanisms designed primarily to enhance and deepen bilateral cooperation across multiple sectors. Within this framework, the two sides agreed to launch the Russia-Africa Partnership Forum in Saint Petersburg as a multidimensional platform intended to facilitate the implementation of the recommendations and outcomes of bilateral summits and to formulate a practical roadmap capable of advancing cooperation beyond the traditional scope of Russian economic engagement on the continent. This orientation was reflected in the outcomes of the first Russia-Africa Economic Forum held in September 2020,[18] during which nearly 92 agreements, contracts and memoranda of understanding were signed. These arrangements covered a broad range of sectors, including exports, economic activity, international cooperation, advanced technology, transport and logistics, mining and exploration, as well as investment and banking services.

The initial institutional meetings that laid the foundations of the Russia-Africa Partnership were followed by the second Russia–Africa Summit held in Saint Petersburg from July 27– July 28, 2023. Owing to the timing of its convening, the summit addressed a new set of issues on the bilateral agenda, particularly those

shaped by the repercussions of the Russia-Ukraine war, most notably in the energy and food sectors, whose consequences extended directly to the African continent.

Before and during the summit, Russia sought to reassure African countries by pledging to compensate for disruptions in Ukrainian grain supplies following Moscow's withdrawal from the UN-backed agreement governing Ukrainian grain exports. At the same time, the summit represented an attempt by Moscow to challenge Western influence and constrain Western strategic options in the context of the Ukrainian conflict.[19]

Although the second summit witnessed lower momentum compared to the 2019 Russia–Africa Summit in Sochi, trade between Russia and African countries nevertheless reached approximately $18 billion during the 2022–2023 period.[20] Russian officials viewed this figure as a significant achievement given the relatively short timeframe and the difficult circumstances facing Moscow as a result of the war in Ukraine, escalating sanctions and mounting Western political and economic pressure.

In addition to the bilateral partnership forums, the Russia–Africa Summit established an important institutional coordination mechanism through periodic ministerial meetings and conferences. These gatherings were designed to address current issues of mutual concern, monitor the implementation of summit resolutions and forum outcomes and prepare the principal agenda items for subsequent summits in accordance with the agreed timetable.

Within this framework, the cooperative process witnessed the convening of two ministerial conferences following 2019: the first in Sochi from November 9 – November 10, 2024, and the second in Cairo from December 19 – December 20, 2025. The Cairo conference coincided with major regional and international developments, particularly the repercussions of the Israeli war on the Gaza Strip[21] and the escalating military and diplomatic tensions surrounding the Russia-Ukraine conflict. These developments provided Russia with broader room for political maneuvering and opportunities to ease mounting international pressure. At the same time, the conference coincided with growing internal political movements across parts of the African continent aimed at addressing instability and political imbalances in several states. This environment, in turn, created additional opportunities for Moscow to strengthen and expand its influence and strategic presence in Africa.

Furthermore, the recent Ministerial Conference in Cairo sought to build upon the outcomes of both the first Russia–Africa Summit and the second Russia–Africa Summit, the latter of which witnessed the adoption of a joint partnership action plan covering the 2023–2026 period. The conference also aimed to advance the outcomes of the first ministerial meeting held in 2024 by presenting the Egyptian vision for stability and development in Africa and by promoting stronger international efforts toward establishing what was described as a more equitable international order for the African continent.

In parallel, the conference emphasized the importance of expanding long-term Russian-African security cooperation and advancing bilateral and regional coordination toward broader and more institutionalized levels of engagement. It also highlighted the continued upward trajectory of cooperation and trade between the two sides, which reached approximately $24 billion in 2025.[22] Finally, the conference approved the formulation of a comprehensive action plan designed to guide Russian-African cooperation through the end of 2029.

Russia's Global Power Rivals in Africa

Any accurate analysis and assessment of the trajectory of the Russia-Africa partnership must take into account the diverse repercussions of the current regional and international environment. The relatively short period since the launch of the bilateral framework through the Russia–Africa Summit has witnessed major geopolitical transformations carrying significant implications at both the international and African levels. These developments have, in turn, directly influenced the behavior and interactions of major powers, including Russia, which has sought to strengthen and expand its influence across the African continent. Within this context, Stephen J. Blank[23] argues that Moscow lacks a clear and comprehensive strategic vision toward its African partners when compared with other international powers active on the continent. At the same time, a number of studies and reports suggest that the economic gains and improvements in trade relations achieved since 2019[24] primarily reflect the broader military and security dimensions of the Kremlin's ambitions in Africa, particularly given Russia's success in concluding more than 30 security and military agreements with several African countries during this period. Accordingly, the trajectory of Russian-African rapprochement remains subject to a range of intersecting factors and variables that may either reinforce or constrain its momentum. These variables include dynamics directly related to both parties themselves, in addition to broader transformations linked to the changing nature of international interactions and geopolitical competition more generally.

To begin with, the intensifying struggle and expanding international competition for influence across the African continent constitute a major factor shaping the trajectory of Russian-African cooperation and partnership during the current period. At the same time, this competition represents one of the principal challenges confronting Moscow's efforts to expand its interests and strategic presence in Africa.

Despite the growing role of Russia on the continent in general, and in West Africa in particular, Africa is witnessing increasing engagement by multiple international actors pursuing diverse objectives and strategies, including Türkiye, Iran and the Gulf states.[25] This competition is further compounded by the rapid expansion of Chinese commercial and economic influence, as Chinese exports to African countries were estimated at approximately $171 billion in 2024 and had

already exceeded $100 billion during the first half of 2025, reflecting an increase of around 21.6%.[26]

Moreover, China frequently structures its engagement with African countries around the principles of what is commonly described as "aid diplomacy." For decades, Beijing has ranked among the world's largest providers of international assistance, while its aid and financing policies have generally been characterized by the absence of explicit political conditionality. Chinese loans have also typically carried lower interest rates than those offered by many Western institutions, alongside more flexible repayment arrangements for recipient states. In addition, Chinese-backed projects have often included elements related to knowledge transfer and technological cooperation through ventures managed and supervised by Chinese companies[27] in beneficiary countries, among other features that have distinguished the Chinese approach to engagement in Africa.

Furthermore, the succession of coups and broader political transitions in several African countries, particularly in West Africa, has been interpreted by some analysts as reflecting a growing sociopolitical sentiment within African societies opposing continued "European and Western dependency and hegemony" over domestic governance structures. At the same time, these developments have also been understood as an inevitable outcome of intensifying international competition for spheres of influence across African regions and countries, reflecting a broader reconfiguration of external engagement on the continent.

In both interpretations, the interests — and in some cases the standing — of European actors have been affected by these shifts, particularly those countries with a longstanding historical presence in the region, such as France. For instance, France's trade with Mali has reportedly declined by approximately 6.7% since 2023.[28] Within this context, Kimberley Marten,[29] in her analysis of Franco-Russian competition in West Africa, argues that Russia has played a significant role in these dynamics, both through providing military, security and political support to countries confronting France's longstanding influence in the region and by leveraging the evolving orientations of African governments to increase pressure aimed at reducing France's historical presence and strategic role on the continent.

Despite the relative decline of French influence in comparison with Russia's expanding presence, Moscow continues to operate in an environment shaped by a cohesive European bloc that remains one of the most significant external actors on the African continent. In this regard, the outcomes of the EU–Africa Partnership Conference held in Luanda, Angola, in November 2025 illustrate the continuing strategic engagement of the European Union (EU) in Africa and the competitive dynamics underpinning its relations with other external powers.

The joint declaration adopted at the conference emphasized the strengthening of strategic cooperation across several key sectors, including energy, particularly through the Green Energy Initiative, which aims to provide access to clean electricity for at least 100 million people in Africa by 2030. It also highlighted

cooperation in energy infrastructure and mineral transport, in alignment with the African Infrastructure Development Programme and the shared objectives of Agenda 2063.[30]

In addition, the declaration underscored continued European support for peace and stability on the continent, including financial packages and grants amounting to €600 million for the period 2022–2025, representing approximately 70% of the European bloc's global contributions under the European Peace Mechanism.[31]

While this sustained European engagement constitutes a direct point of competition with Russia's expanding ambitions in Africa, it nevertheless appears insufficient to fully match the pace of ongoing geopolitical and structural transformations on the continent. This is further complicated by accelerating political changes within Africa itself, alongside persistent structural imbalances and practical challenges affecting the effectiveness of the Africa–Europe partnership.

It is also important to note the persistent development gap affecting the African continent, which has been shaped by a range of contributing factors, including a notable decline in the scale of US aid and development assistance since the first term of President Donald Trump. These sharp reductions in US development financing have had adverse effects on a number of African countries,[32] creating additional pressures on policymakers in the Russian Federation, which is not in a position to offset such shortfalls.

As a result, the possibility of Moscow filling the strategic vacuum historically associated with Western engagement in Africa remains constrained, particularly in light of the significant financial and material costs associated with the ongoing war in Ukraine. Within this context, Russia is likely to face intensified competition, as China continues to leverage its substantial economic capacity to position itself as a credible alternative partner across the continent.

Although European officials acknowledge that they are unable to fully close this development gap, European assistance continues to play an important and influential role in sustaining its presence in Africa. Official development assistance from EU member states and institutions reached €95.9 billion in 2023, an increase of €24.3 billion compared to 2021. However, the war in Ukraine, the financial burden of hosting refugees in donor countries and the broader repercussions of multiple global crises have significantly affected the flow of official development assistance from the EU to Africa, and this downward pressure is expected to persist in the medium term.[33]

The Challenges Facing the Russo-African Partnership

Research on Russia-Africa relations often begins with a set of fundamental questions, foremost among them how African decision-makers perceive Russia as a partner and external actor. While Russia has assumed an increasingly visible role across various regions of the continent, it is important to emphasize that African perceptions of Moscow are neither uniform nor consistent, and vary significantly according to national interests and historical experience.

Within this diverse landscape, some African countries are traditionally regarded as strategic partners of Moscow. In this context, Egypt and Algeria are frequently cited, although cooperation with Russia in these cases is largely concentrated in the military sphere. For instance, arms agreements with Algeria — estimated at approximately $7 billion in 2021 — position Russia as the country's principal arms supplier, accounting for roughly 72.63% of its procurement in this sector.[34]

At the same time, another group of African countries tends to view the Russian role primarily as a political and security alternative to traditional European powers, particularly in relation to France. This divergence in African perceptions, and the absence of a unified continental stance toward Moscow, contributes to a partnership dynamic that appears uneven and fragmented when compared with the more structured engagement strategies of other major international actors.

In line with this argument, a further dilemma emerges that may shape the future trajectory of Russian-African cooperation. In this context, Mohamed Hamchi highlights the absence of the notion of a "true ally" and the emergence of what he terms a "false alliance" in characterizing aspects of Russian-African interactions.[35]

For example, a significant number of African countries continue to be classified as longstanding strategic partners of the United States; cases often cited in this regard include Algeria, Egypt and Ethiopia. This dilemma is further reinforced by the relatively limited material gains that many African countries may derive from engagement with Russia when compared with the offers and instruments provided by other major international actors. China, for instance, has developed within its Belt and Road Initiative a wide range of large-scale infrastructure and development projects across numerous African states in both West and East Africa, producing tangible on-the-ground outcomes. Similarly, the EU has launched the Global Gateway Initiative (GGI), an ambitious framework aimed at mobilizing up to €300 billion globally, including approximately €150 billion directed toward Africa, with a focus on grants rather than loans, thereby potentially offering an advantage by mitigating debt accumulation concerns in several African countries.[36] In contrast, Russia's constraints are closely linked to the limited diversification of its economic structure, which remains heavily dependent on the energy and military-industrial sectors.

On the other hand, the practical reality of the Russia-Africa partnership is characterized by a noticeable imbalance and an uneven distribution of gains and benefits between the two sides. Amid intensifying competition to advance and entrench Russian interests across Africa in the face of alternative and often more comprehensive international strategies, one of the key challenges confronting both parties — particularly policymakers in Moscow — remains the need to achieve a greater degree of balance and reciprocity across different dimensions of engagement, including trade, economic exchange and military-security cooperation with African partners.

Available economic data over the years since the establishment of the bilateral partnership framework reveal significant disparities in Russia's economic priorities and patterns of engagement across the continent. In this context, Egypt and Ethiopia are often identified as among the principal beneficiaries of structured cooperation mechanisms with Russia, while trade linkages with other African countries remain comparatively limited.

Recent statistics indicate that bilateral trade with Egypt reached approximately $9 billion in 2024,[37] while trade with Ethiopia stood at around $435 million in 2025.[38]

The nature of the Russian military presence in Africa — predominantly driven by private military companies like the Wagner Group — poses a distinct challenge to Moscow's formal diplomatic cooperation. Wagner's operations have exacerbated regional violence and militarization, implicating the group in severe violations against civilians. Furthermore, this presence has fragmented local security structures, deeply compounding regional instability. By exploiting domestic vulnerabilities to secure vital resources, the group has inadvertently triggered dangerous ramifications for the stability of Russia's own zones of influence. Consequently, geopolitical rivals have seized upon these systemic failures to undermine Moscow's partnerships and broader cooperation across the African continent.

It is worth noting that sustaining the upward trajectory of Russia-Africa relations requires additional efforts to strengthen mutual trust between the two sides. Persistent doubts remain in parts of African public opinion regarding Russia's role as a strategic partner and the underlying intentions guiding its engagement with the continent. In some cases, this has contributed to narratives that reject external involvement framed as renewed "international competition," which is at times interpreted as a form of "neo-colonialism."

Against this backdrop, Moscow faces the challenge of undertaking deliberate steps to build trust both bilaterally — through direct, state-to-state partnerships with African countries — and multilaterally, by aligning its actions more closely with continental development frameworks such as the AU's Agenda 2063.[39]

At the same time, Russia must also address perceptions that it contributes to the spread of instability on the continent. Such perceptions are partly linked to the increasing focus of Russian policy on politically unstable or "fragile" African countries, as previously noted. In this regard, Maria Perrotta[40] highlights a broader pattern in Russian diplomatic activity, characterized by an increased frequency of high-level visits and sustained engagement with countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Sudan, in contrast to relatively lower levels of diplomatic engagement with more stable African countries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, assessing the dynamics of Russia-Africa relations requires a multilayered analytical approach due to a set of diverse considerations and driving factors. These include, first and foremost, the relatively recent nature of the current phase of the partnership, particularly when viewed through the prism of the Russia–Africa Summit, which marked the effective launch of a comprehensive institutional framework between both sides. In addition, the evolving momentum of regional, continental and broader international developments continues to play a significant role in shaping the trajectory of this relationship. Nevertheless, it remains important to underscore Russia's limited yet non-negligible capacity to contribute to certain geopolitical shifts across various African countries and regions — shifts that have, to varying degrees, influenced the broader reconfiguration of patterns of international influence and competition on the continent. In this context, and in light of the prospective frameworks outlined at both the Sochi and Saint Petersburg summits, as well as the resolutions adopted at the recent Ministerial Conference in Cairo, there are indications of gradual institutional development in bilateral cooperation. However, this progress remains relatively slow and largely characterized by short-term, tactical phases, as reflected in the bilateral action plan covering the period 2026–2029.

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