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AI POWERED SURVEILLANCE: USA-IRAN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR MIDDLE EASTERN STABILITY

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ABSTRACT

This study will examine how AI-based surveillance technologies might impact Middle Eastern geopolitics, in particular, the US-Iran relation and its implications for regional stability. Drawing on a theory that combines Realism, Neo-Realism, Foucault's surveillance and power theories and Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, this article analyses the impact of surveillance technologies on the strategic behaviour of states, the security crisis, and regional power dynamics. The USA, Iran and other Middle Eastern states – Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – are investing more and more in AI-powered surveillance for national security, rival tracking and internal opposition suppression. This technocratic arms race not only increases regional instability, it also increases the distrust between states and erodes stability in the Middle East. The study points to surveillance as both a weapon of state authority and an agent of insecurity that feeds the vicious circle of competition and technological innovation that undermines the region's politics.

Keywords. Ai Powered, Surveillance, Usa, Iran, Consequences, Eastern

1. Introduction

Recent developments regarding artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning have rapidly changed circumstances in many areas, including national security and surveillance. Contextualized between the two countries global geopolitics, the USA and Iran have places reliance on AI-based surveillance systems to track operations, fortify national security and retain the edge in conventional as well as asymmetric warfare. How nations, especially the US and Iran but more broadly how countries interact with each other in general, if not most of them and have transformed their intelligence mechanism due to the emerging demand for information through surveillance technologies using AI such as facial recognition, data mining and real-time

monitoring systems. In the context of sour relations between these two states, AI-enabled surveillance can become a consolidated driver for conflict escalation, distrust increase and international security architecture restructuring in at least Middle East.¹ So, this research aims to challenge certain assumptions regarding AI mediation under US-Iran conditions: through some aspects of bilateral relations in terms of official policies, scope of activities in the Middle East and implications if kinetic war happens.

2. Research Question

1. What are the implications of AI-based surveillance in the US-Iran relations for regional security issues in the Middle East with respect to the application of surveillance technology for intelligence, military planning and political control?
2. How do the US and Iran's formal policy of AI-driven surveillance play out in the larger Middle East and what are the implications for sovereignty, privacy and interstate relations?

Official Policy of US

AI and surveillance technologies have become key tools of national security strategy for the superpower that remains the United States. The 2018 National Defense Strategy clearly identified and prioritized AI for defense development, highlighting its importance in providing military advantage with the utilization of unmanned systems. Much like the rest of the globe, the US has heavily invested in AI-driven surveillance systems—satellites, drones and cyber intelligence systems; to name just a few. These technologies allow the US to monitor its enemies and friends alike, perform real-time intelligence collection, and forecast movements with an efficiency that has never before been possible.² One of the most integral aspects of US surveillance programs is certainly its cooperation with other intelligence agencies such as NSA, CIA, DIA that also utilize AI to improve their data understanding, pattern spotting and prediction abilities. On foreign policy grounds, the United States has long been antagonistic towards Iran, particularly since the US pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 and escalated tensions with economic sanctions, cyber interferences and intelligence missions.

¹ A Downey - Digital War and undefined 2024, "Algorithmic Predictions and Pre-Emptive Violence: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Unmanned Aerial Systems," *Springer* 5, no. 1–2 (January 2024): 123–33, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42984-023-00068-7>.

² Babak Rahimi Ardabili et al., "Understanding Policy and Technical Aspects of Ai-Enabled Smart Video Surveillance to Address Public Safety," *Springer* 3, no. 1 (December 1, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43762-023-00097-8>.

AI surveillance is part of the US's overall plan in the Middle East, a region that is seen as important for keeping political power and military strength. The Pentagon uses AI technology in various military actions in places like Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, mainly focusing on counterterrorism and stopping Iranian influence from spreading. To address concerns about Iran's nuclear goals, AI surveillance is key in keeping an eye on Iran's nuclear sites and military setups (Saura et al., 2022). Moreover, the US military is developing AI application for the electronic systems, cyberspace warfare, and intelligence gathering in order to reduce risk of conflict and increase the efficiency of surveillance.³

Official policy of Iran

The major set of rules regulating surveillance and AI in Iran is primarily the nation's political orientation and its issues concerning security in the Middle East. After the proclaiming of Islamic revolution in 1979, there are requirements to 'smart and independent' defense and intelligence with the main orientation on the non-dependence from the Western countries, especially the USA. The interrelation between AI plans and tactics in Iran and the surveillance system prove that the entire package is a connection between regional interests, internal control, and security of power.⁴

The Iranian government has an active role in funneling a lot of resources to enhance the nation's capabilities in cyberspace, including the use of artificial intelligence in its surveillance regime. For instance, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as well as other cyber formations have created AI tools to address a number of threats both domestic and international. Such systems are primarily intended to respond to the actions of net activism, the opposition to governments, and external interference. In 2021, Iran has come up with a national AI strategy that outlines the government's plans of using artificial intelligence not only to safeguard the national security, but also to propel economic and technological growth. Additionally, AI surveillance technologies have been employed to oversee Iran's extensive borders and to monitor neighboring nations, especially in relation to military operations in Iraq and Syria, where Iran maintains substantial influence.

³ SSH Gillani, "The Prospects of Normalization and Strengthening of Iran-Saudi Relations and Its Implications for the USA," *Journals.Pakistanreview.Com*, 2024, <https://journals.pakistanreview.com/index.php/PRSS/article/view/266>.

⁴ S Akbarzadeh, ... W Gourlay - Journal of Strategic, and undefined 2023, "Iranian Proxies in the Syrian Conflict: Tehran's 'forward-Defence' in Action," *Taylor & Francis*, accessed December 20, 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2021.2023014>.

Within the broader context of the Middle East, AI surveillance is regarded by Iran as an essential mechanism for sustaining regional dominance and countering the influence exerted by the United States and its allies. A historical reliance on technology for the monitoring of adversaries underscores the sophistication introduced by AI-enhanced surveillance in Iran's intelligence-gathering operations. Moreover, engagement in cyber warfare has been evidenced by Iran's utilization of AI-powered systems to execute attacks on critical infrastructure in the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. It is anticipated that the Iranian government will employ artificial intelligence not solely for defensive measures but also as a means to project power regionally, utilizing surveillance technologies to scrutinize the military activities and movements of the United States in the Middle East.⁵

Impact on Middle East

The Middle East is one of the most unstable areas globally with the US and Iran playing central roles in a complicated and often confrontational geopolitical situation. Both nations significantly impact the region, influencing conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Some of the ways through which the US seeks to limit Iran's influence include military deployment; support for their allies like the Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and assistance to Israel more namely in fighting against Iran's military interference in different proxy wars. At the same time, Iran concentrates on guerrilla tactics and using native agents in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq to oppose the US and spread influence. The introduction of artificial intelligence in surveillance practices has led to higher chances of escalation in the area. Currently, the US deploys AI to spy on Iran's military, and at the same time, Iran employs AI to spy on the US military. Such constant monitoring helps foster conditions of heightened risk for potential aggression where even a single slip is likely to spark tensions. Involvement of regional actors such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey increases the stakes thanks to the fact that these nations align themselves with one faction, thus compounding the conflict.

The possibility of AI surveillance intensifying conflicts between the United States and Iran remains high. In the event of a military conflict and tensions, AI technologies will enhance the approaches that are used in the war, spying, and cyber warfare. Turkish and Iranian abilities to monitor and assess each other and estimate their actions

⁵ Mohammad Eslami, Nasim Sadat Mosavi, and Muhammed Can, "Sino-Iranian Cooperation in Artificial Intelligence: A Potential Countering Against the US Hegemony," *The Palgrave Handbook of Globalization with Chinese Characteristics: The Case of the Belt and Road Initiative*, January 1, 2023, 543–59, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-19-6700-9_32.

through AI systems can lead to the escalation of hostility in a short period, posing a danger to the Middle East region. If aggression between the US and Iran ensues it might have weaker guarantors at higher altitudes; produce volatility in the global oil market; increase refugee influx and exacerbation of conflicts in the region. Therefore, to prevent a clash between China and the Philippines in Scarborough Shoal, both nation's must engage in the process of de-escalation.

3. Theoretical Framework

The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) powered surveillance in international politics is shifting security and political realities in the Middle East, especially as it relates to the conflict between the US and Iran. As AI advances (ML, facial recognition, data analytics, etc), we have enabled us to see the limits of what we can observe, collect intelligence, and even arm. But such developments are also concerning for state sovereignty, privacy and the broader implications for regional stability.

It's an abstract theory that considers the impact of AI-driven surveillance in the context of geopolitical competition between the US and Iran on security in the Middle East. It also looks into what the official US and Iranian positions regarding AI-based surveillance might have to do with sovereignty, privacy, interstate and geopolitical implications. The model will use applicable political science, security studies, surveillance and international relations theory to discuss these impacts.

Background Theoretical Bases: surveillance, power and technology

The fundamental theme for this debate about the place of AI-powered surveillance in US-Iran ties was Michel Foucault's theories of surveillance and power, especially his Panopticon. The point of Foucault's book is that surveillance isn't merely the physical surveillance of people or things, but is entangled with power construction. In AI-led surveillance, this surveillance is machined and broad, and allows states to monitor populations, contain opposition and, crucially, to control other states.⁶

And Panopticon could be extended to world politics, in which AI monitoring would be not only capable of internal censorship but of external power. Each USA and Iranian uses AI surveillance as a means of soft power and intelligence supremacy, to infiltrate regional politics and militaries with information that goes into the billions. Foucault's concept of govern mentality – that is, state administration of populations – can be extended to the surveillance of AI. Both the US and Iran employ these technologies to track their own people as well as their opponents, complicating power dynamics and regional stability.

⁶ Eslami, Mosavi, and Can.

A related theory is the research into commodification of personal information by Shoshana Zuboff's theory of surveillance capitalism. In state surveillance, particularly AI, this is not just about private firms, it's about the state. Data and information ownership is geopolitical clout for states such as the US and Iran, who leverage AI surveillance for national security and to extend their influence in the Middle East, possibly to the detriment of the sovereignty of others in the region.

Geopolitical Ideas: Realism, Regional Security Complexes and the Security Problem.

In looking at how AI surveillance will affect US-Iran and the Middle East more generally, we need look no further than realist theory of international relations. Realist thinking places states at the core of an anarchic international order, for reasons of security, strength and national interest. Artificial intelligence-based monitoring, then, is a weapon of statecraft – one that serves the interests of the US and Iran in their own country, as well as attempting to undermine or extinguish one another's foothold in the region.

AI-surveillance is fast looming as part of military doctrine and intelligence, two pillars of realist philosophy. As a superpower, the US is using AI technologies to monitor Iran's nuclear programme and airspace as well as to exert its power over its proxies in the region. Iran itself uses AI to track its borders, its forces and gather intelligence on its enemies, the US and its allies in the region. Neither one of them wants to give up information, nor does the arms race over surveillance technology continue. This contest's winner impacts regional strength, because surveillance is used for deterrence, cyber warfare and intelligence.⁷

The theory of regional security complexes by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever provides a framework for thinking about the effect of AI surveillance on the Middle East. A regional security complex is a concept where states' security interests in a geographical region are inextricably connected, and where what one state does directly affects the security of others. Once AI monitoring becomes more central to statecraft, it can tilt regional security power in ways that haven't been possible before, especially in a fragile region such as the Middle East where states are vying for resources, control and influence. This growing technological arms race could be the impetus that harms other Middle Eastern states that might find themselves targeted by the US and Iran's AI surveillance system.

⁷ T Saheb - AI and Ethics and undefined 2023, "Ethically Contentious Aspects of Artificial Intelligence Surveillance: A Social Science Perspective," *Springer* 3, no. 2 (May 2023): 369–79, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43681-022-00196-y>.

Security dilemma theory also makes clear how dangerous AI surveillance can be. This theory posits that as one state increases its security – for example by conducting more sophisticated surveillance – the other states see these actions as dangerous and increase their own security thereby making tensions higher. For instance, if the US adopts AI-based surveillance to track Iranian war crimes, Iran could see this as an existential crisis and upgrade its own surveillance. The cycle that can result from this security dilemma can fuel more regional instability and propel the Middle East toward ever more militarization and war.⁸

US and Iranian Official Policies: AI Surveillance as a Military Weapon

US Official Policy

The US has always been a strong advocate of new technologies for warfare and intelligence. With the US National Defence Strategy (NDS) and Cyber security Strategy, AI and surveillance technologies have become core parts of its global security system. The US uses AI-based spying not just to track its adversaries (eg, Iran) but also to shape its allies there (eg, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE). NSAs also keep the US in strategic position, providing information for military strikes, peacekeeping and diplomacy.⁹ Both the National Security Agency (NSA) and the CIA have used AI for everything from cyber intelligence, counter-terrorism and geospatial intelligence. AI integration in such intelligence operations allows the US to anticipate possible adversaries and inform the Middle Eastern governments through data. But the US AI surveillance has other opponents too, especially Iran, who see this spying as an affront to its sovereignty and national security.

Iran's Official Policy on Surveillance

Iran's surveillance measures are also very much part of the country's national security plans against the US and the regional powers.

Internal Monitoring and Repression: Iran is the first country to utilize AI-driven surveillance to dominate its domestic population. Iranian government use AI technologies (such as facial recognition and monitoring social media) to monitor citizens and demonise dissidents. It has also been blamed for using the surveillance apparatus to suppress dissent – particularly against economic insecurity or political rights.

Spying on Local Activity: Iran too monitors activities of its competition and friends through surveillance technologies. Iranian intelligence services, including the IRGC

⁸ Eslami, Mosavi, and Can, "Sino-Iranian Cooperation in Artificial Intelligence: A Potential Countering Against the US Hegemony."

⁹ Ardabili et al., "Understanding Policy and Technical Aspects of Ai-Enabled Smart Video Surveillance to Address Public Safety."

(Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), depend on AI-based instruments for cyber surveillance, military tracking and gathering intelligence on US and Israeli activity. They exploit these powers to fend off US military intervention in the region and to track Iranian-allied militias in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon.

Cyber and Information Warfare: Iran's cyber strategy also involves using AI to attack the adversaries especially when there is US aggression. Iran's own AI surveillance devices are designed to attack US and Western intelligence systems, but Iran also guards its own proprietary military and political secrets.

AI-Driven Security in the Middle East: Regional Dimensions beyond US-Iran Relations

Even beyond the US relationship with Iran, AI-based surveillance extends far and wide in the Middle East. Over the past few years, most nations of the region have turned to advanced surveillance systems to consolidate their geopolitical reach, domestic stability, and strategic advantages in internal and external relations. Important regional players such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, the UAE and Turkey are all investing heavily in AI-driven surveillance, which they believe can help to monitor information, track people and fight a war of tech wars.¹⁰

Saudi Arabia and the UAE: Surveillance for Domestic Control and Regional Influence

So has Saudi Arabia and UAE, both of which have turned to AI-based surveillance technologies for security and administration. The two monarchies of the Gulf have heavily invested in state-of-the-art surveillance using facial, biometric and behaviour tracking of their citizens and subjects. The applications of these technologies are most active in cities like Riyadh, Dubai and Abu Dhabi where artificially intelligent cameras and sensors track motion in real time. Such mechanisms are often defended as means of counterterrorism and public safety, especially as security threats from regional instability mount.

But there are other problems with such surveillance: human rights and civil liberties. When they are used by dictatorships, they say, the technology is not only used to prevent terrorism, but also to neutralise political dissidents, to banish free speech, and to maintain the rule of law. The AI monitoring in Saudi Arabia and the UAE are used to follow social media posts, observe demonstrations and trace anti-government

¹⁰ Eslami, Mosavi, and Can, "Sino-Iranian Cooperation in Artificial Intelligence: A Potential Countering Against the US Hegemony."

activists. That has led to the detention of political opponents, journalists and human rights defenders, in the name of national security.¹¹

And the application of AI monitoring doesn't stop in the home. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have used surveillance technologies to track regional opponents, and to protect their interests in raging conflicts like those in Yemen and Libya. AI devices follow armed movements, target and manage war effort. In these cases, AI is positioned as a multiplier of force in battle fields, providing valuable information to influence military plans.

Israel: Artificial Intelligence as an Intelligence and Security Tool

Israeli cyber security and AI innovator has extensive use of artificial intelligence in surveillance for national security and regional attack response. More specifically, the nation has engaged in spying, specifically in the war against security threat from Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and other Iran-backed Syrian and Iraqi militias. Israel's powerful AI surveillance technologies combine drones, satellites and ground sensors to let the government keep tabs on what happens at its borders 24/7. These AI algorithms parse millions of pieces of data — including intercepted phone calls and surveillance videos — to identify the next terrorist plot or smuggling deal.¹²

What's more, Israel's cyber defenses are dominated by AI to defend its vital infrastructure against Iranian hackers. Iran has attacked Israel's energy, water and military in the past on cyber-attacks, and Israel's defense against these cyber-attacks includes AI-based algorithms that will detect, block and eliminate cyber-attacks in real time. As well as defense, AI surveillance is used to protect Israeli settlements, bases and cities from enemies — in this way protecting Israel's geopolitical interests in a very volatile area.

Turkish Surveillance Policy and AI: A Review

The Turkish government has been increasingly dependent on AI-based surveillance in its larger national security plan, especially with its presence in the Syrian war and its conflicts with the US and Iran.

Turkey uses AI based surveillance to watch the population (especially political opposition and "terrorist groups"). The Turkish government also uses surveillance technology in their investigation of Kurds and other minorities both inside and outside the Turkish nation. AI allows the Turkish state to monitor pro-state activities inside Turkey as well as across the border, particularly in northern Syria, where Kurds live.

¹¹ Ethics and 2023, "Ethically Contentious Aspects of Artificial Intelligence Surveillance: A Social Science Perspective."

¹² Ardabili et al., "Understanding Policy and Technical Aspects of Ai-Enabled Smart Video Surveillance to Address Public Safety."

Turkey's surveillance equipment tracks Iran's power in Syria and Iraq, too. Turkey is in the proxy wars with Iran in these states and surveillance offers crucial information on Iranian-sponsored militias and Iranian forces movements. Turkey especially fears Iranian increasing presence in Syria and uses AI monitoring to monitor Iranian activity and regional allies.

Turkey already applies AI to military operations and has deployed AI to acquire intelligence on the whereabouts of Iranian and US forces in Syria. The country is also now working to improve its self-defence systems, including artificially intelligent surveillance drones that would track adversary movements in real time.

As AI surveillance tech advances, power in the Middle East could increasingly be decided by the power of states to accumulate, analyse and use a massive amount of intelligence. These technologies promise better state security but they present broader issues of sovereignty, privacy and regional security that may have long-term implications for regional peace.

Sovereignty, Privacy and the Inter-State Relations in the Middle East

AI-powered surveillance poses some big questions for sovereignty, privacy and the relationship between states in the Middle East. AI to track and gather intelligence on foreign countries questions national sovereignty and the validity of foreign intrusion. Security by major powers such as the US and Iran could breach smaller Middle Eastern nations' sovereignty, if carried out without their consent. It can cause diplomatic tensions, since countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Israel – all tightly associated with the US and Iran – could be caught in the crosshairs of surveillance.¹³

Privacy and civil liberties in the US and Iran as well as the region are also seriously threatened by AI surveillance technology. Artificial intelligence-based surveillance technology — facial recognition and mass data collection, to name just a few — expands the powers of states to track and oppress populations, leading to human rights violations. Under authoritarian governments, including in Iran, AI surveillance technologies could be deployed to silence opposition, censor political dissidents and spy on dissidents.

This theory of interdependence is a good theory to use when it comes to understanding how the Middle East responds to AI surveillance. Here, what a state does affects the security and political integrity of other states. For example, the US's surveillance of Iran and its proxies could provoke revenge from Iran or its regional proxy to destabilize the region.

¹³ Eslami, Mosavi, and Can, "Sino-Iranian Cooperation in Artificial Intelligence: A Potential Countering Against the US Hegemony."

4. Discussion Model: AI-Driven Terrorism, USA-Iran Competition, and Regional Stability in the Middle East

The aim of this research is to consider the implications for security and geopolitics of the Middle East, especially the US-Iran relationship, of AI-powered surveillance technologies increasingly being at the centre of the Middle East. As the potential of AI transforms intelligence operations, military planning and political behaviour, it is important to know their implications for regional stability. The Middle East, with its interwoven constellation of alliances, competition and ongoing conflicts, is a special case in which the use of AI surveillance capabilities can have major ramifications. The US and Iran – two of the strongest and most ideologically opposed powers in the region – are major players whose AI-based surveillance policies could have an impact not just on their bilateral relations but on the Middle Eastern security context more generally. The aim of this study is to determine the extent to which these states use AI surveillance for intelligence purposes, military purposes and diplomatic pressure, and the more general implications for regional governance, sovereignty and privacy. The primary goal of the research will be to determine the ethical and political impact of these technologies – especially in terms of loss of state sovereignty, intrusion and political unrest. By providing an update on the changing nature of AI surveillance during US-Iran relations, this study will try to provide an overarching perspective on wider implications for stability in the Middle East, with policy suggestions and findings that can guide the next international discussions about AI governance in war zones. After all, the challenge is to determine just how AI surveillance is not only changing military and intelligence operations, but also transforming the regional power structure, political reality and global dynamics with implications for global peace and security.

And it will look at how AI-based surveillance is shaping the Middle East (more specifically, the USA-Iran relationship and its implications for regional stability). Based on Realism, Neo-Realism, Michel Foucault's surveillance and power theory, and Kenneth Waltz's structural realism, in this essay I will argue that AI-enabled surveillance technologies add to current power imbalances, heighten the security challenge, and shape the geopolitics of the region. More specifically, it will reveal how the USA, Iran and other major regional players such as Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE use AI surveillance technology to influence political outcomes, protect national security and control both internal and external threats. What this analysis will show is that while these technologies confer security benefits, they also expose new vulnerabilities and

destabilize the area through an ever more vicious cycle of distrust, competition and violence.¹⁴

Realist and Neo-Realist: Surveillance as State Power?

Realism, a central theory of international politics, says that states exist within an anarchic international order where there is no supranational authority to direct their actions. State interests are dominated by survival in such a system, and the state's behavior is self-interested, most especially if it wants to become powerful and secure. AI-enabled surveillance becomes, from this angle, an essential instrument for national security and power-centrism. The US, an engine of technological prowess unmatched anywhere, uses surveillance to not only track threats but also to crush its competitors and retake the world stage. The US, for example, uses various AI surveillance technologies – from satellite images to drone flights to cyber intelligence – to keep an eye on Iran's nuclear program and influence in the region.¹⁵

For Neo-Realists like Kenneth Waltz, the organization of the international order determines how states act. The idea of Neo-Realism is that state action is the result of the underlying structures of the global order, and in this case, the deployment of surveillance technologies by the US automatically triggers neighboring states such as Iran to do the same. This dynamic puts the US in a race with Iran to make its own AI-enabled surveillance systems to protect its sovereignty and to fight US overreach. It is not just Iran who is reacting this way; Israel, Saudi Arabia and the UAE — often allies of the US — are all intensifying their surveillance, a regional surveillance arms race.

This technological rivalry reveals the security dilemma, which Realism and Neo-Realism have held so dear. The US' growing surveillance capabilities in the area are seen by Iran as a direct threat to Iranian national security and so it strengthens its own surveillance capabilities. Neither are Israel nor the Gulf countries, who increasingly need to use AI spy tools to track what Iran is doing. The end result is suspicion,

¹⁴ S Zabih and S Chubin, *The Foreign Relations of Iran: A Developing State in a Zone of Great Power Conflict*, 2023, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=O-XeEAAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PT8&dq=us+iran+conflict&ots=ybKvwfXfZH&sig=YCf8kX1vwX5HbXlz2zrpYhDyF1M>.

¹⁵ A Saleh, Z Yazdanshenas - *British Journal of Middle Eastern*, and undefined 2024, "China-Iran Strategic Partnership and the Future of US Hegemony in the Persian Gulf Region," *Taylor & Francis* 51, no. 2 (2023): 377–400, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2023.2215188>.

technologicalisation and instability, in which what one state does to protect itself makes others more vulnerable.

Foucault's Surveillance and Power: The Panopticon in Operation.

The theory of surveillance that Michel Foucault develops, namely the 'Panopticon', is one useful source for understanding the presence of AI surveillance in the Middle East. Foucault's Panopticon, designed originally as a prison design where one guard could be seen by all inmates, without anyone ever knowing that they were being observed, becomes the image of the contemporary surveillance state. For Foucault, surveillance isn't just an instrument of domination, but of disciplinary management of the individual and society. In a panoptic system, the knowledge that they can always be watched triggers regulation and internalization of power dynamics: people adapt behavior to the expectation that they will be observed at any time.

When it comes to AI surveillance in the Middle East, Foucault's Panopticon theory plays an important role: it allows us to see how regimes such as Iran and the US spy on foreign enemies as well as their own people. AI monitoring is Iran's most effective weapon against dissent and political protest. With Iran as a political country, where protests and rebellions within the country have constituted a persistent threat to the regime, the surveillance with AI to detect and crush dangers lies at the heart of sustaining the regime. For Foucauldian reasons, Iranian state surveillance of its citizens, be it through facial recognition, surveillance of social networks and internet censorship, is in itself a method of social discipline: a way to stop opposition before it starts, by telling citizens they are under constant watch.

As does the USA's adoption of AI surveillance technologies, in particular with respect to Iran, in a Foucauldian order of power and domination. Although most of the USA's espionage activity is from the outside looking in on Iran, its forces and regional power, it's also used to assert US control over the Middle East. And the USA's surveillance of Iranian behaviour enforces its hegemonic might while implicitly signalling to Iran and other regional powers that they too are perpetually under surveillance. This gives the USA a power differential whereby the enemy like Iran is unable to avoid acting, whether

by updating their own surveillance technology or developing alternative means of emulating the USA.¹⁶

The logic of Foucault's idea of power, of surveillance as an exercise in conformity and domination, holds for internal politics of Saudi Arabia, UAE and other states. Such regimes, who increasingly rely on surveillance to check political opposition and control citizens, implement the panoptic logic themselves. AI surveillance systems in these countries are all part of a larger strategy of consolidation of authority and avoidance of resistance. This domestication of surveillance is part of a wider regional system in which AI surveillance technologies not only impose order on the world but also create societies where everyone knows exactly what they're monitoring, so as to keep them willing and stable.

Waltz's Structural Realist and the Growth of Surveillance Technologies.

The rise of AI-based surveillance in the Middle East is captured by Kenneth Waltz's structural realism. Structural realism, or Neo-Realism, says that the world order is anarchic, and that power dynamics in the system shape state behavior. States care primarily about staying alive, and in anarchy they do so by increasing their own strength relative to other states. In the Middle East, for example, this relative strength is being more and more shaped by technology, especially surveillance technologies.

The USA technological superiority in spying forces Iran, Israel and other regional states to build their own cutting-edge AI apparatus to balance the scales. While the USA gains snooping power, Iran and others consider this directly an attack on their security, and counter them accordingly. In this process, motivated by the need to stay relatively strong and secure, the arms race in surveillance systems increases in the region. The competition for technological dominance of surveillance technology then becomes a central component of state strategy and of the region's security environment.¹⁷

As part of Waltz's structural realism, the security question can be found best in the USA-Iran war. For Iran, the US's use of AI-based surveillance to spy on Iran's nuclear program and military is an interference in its sovereignty. Iran in turn builds its own AI intelligence surveillance systems, upgraded cyber-tools and intelligence-collecting

¹⁶ Louise Fawcett and Andrew Payne, "Stuck on a Hostile Path? US Policy towards Iran since the Revolution," *Contemporary Politics* 29, no. 1 (2023): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2022.2029239>.

¹⁷ War and 2024, "Algorithmic Predictions and Pre-Emptive Violence: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Unmanned Aerial Systems."

apparatus, to defend itself. This escalates, with both countries competing for technological advantage, but neither of them ever being truly secure. As each party increases its surveillance, so too does suspicion, and so does the competition that unravels the region. It's a competitive dynamic which is only made worse by the involvement of other countries like Israel and Saudi Arabia who are also seeking to upgrade their surveillance capabilities to resist Iran's expanding technology.

The Security Dilemma and Regional Stability

The security dilemma is at the heart of the global implications of AI-based surveillance. The more the USA, Iran and the rest of the Middle East intensify their surveillance, the more one country's actions are seen as threatening by another and so on, and the arms race starts. The security dilemma is one of the principal causes of instability in the Middle East, since when one state erupts with AI surveillance tools, others do the same, whether they mean it or not. In a state-to-state avalanche of technological increases, mutual distrust and suspicion intensifies, and cooperative measures or diplomatic ententes are harder to achieve.

The USA-Iran spy race is a case study in the security paradox at work. If the US starts using ever-more sophisticated surveillance systems, especially satellite and drone technology, Iran views this as an invasion of Iranian sovereignty and national security. Iran counters with increased surveillance not only for USA monitoring, but to stop Israeli and Saudi threats. The combination makes each state perpetually competitive and becomes progressively weaker in view of its opponents' perceived technological advantages. The net effect is a disintegrative cycle in which the area grows ever more dangerous not through conscious killing but through the unnatural distrust created by the arms race of surveillance technologies.¹⁸

This security dilemma also manifests in domestic politics. For dictatorships such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, AI surveillance has an external as well as an internal security function. At home, these regimes deploy surveillance technology to watch and suppress political opposition and keep regimes in check. But mass surveillance can be the cause of domestic instability too, as people can feel that the surveillance is repressive and excessive, leading to more discontent and even resistance.

¹⁸ Frank Chiang, "The State and Sovereignty," *The One-China Policy: State, Sovereignty, and Taiwan's International Legal Status*, 2018, 13–99, <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-08-102314-3.00002-1>.

5. Policy Recommendations

- **Multilateral Control of AI Monitoring Systems**

As AI-driven surveillance systems are increasingly spreading, a multilateral order of the order through an international agency such as the UN or the Arab League will be needed to regulate the use of these technologies. The law should deal with privacy concerns, ethics and security concerns so that AI monitoring isn't used for authoritarian control but rather for regional stability and building of trust.

- **Promote Transparency in AI Deployment**

The US, Iran and other countries in the Middle East should be encouraged to make public what their AI surveillance programmes are for, how wide and deep they extend. Clearer AI surveillance can build trust, and prevent mis-interpretation and escalate in vulnerable places.

- **Ensure Cyber security and Counter-Intelligence Cooperation**

Amid the cyber-elementary security features engendered by AI surveillance, Middle Eastern nations need to work on cybersecurity. A regional cybersecurity agreement or mutual intelligence-sharing network could stop AI surveillance being maliciously used or used for destabilising ends. That might help to avoid issues with espionage and cyber-attacks, when opposing countries use AI to spy on or undermine rival states' political or military operations.

- **Emphasize Human Rights Protections**

If not appropriately controlled, AI surveillance threatens individual liberties and human rights violations, particularly in politically unstable areas. Governments should make sure that AI-based systems are in line with international human rights standards in terms of privacy, freedom of expression and political association. In addition, states must do more to ensure that individuals are not targeted and exploited unnecessarily.

- **Establish Crisis Communication Mechanisms:**

The US and Iran should establish direct crisis communications channels for resolving confusion or tensions around AI surveillance given the stakes on US-Iran, and Middle

Eastern geopolitics more generally. These would de-escalate conflicts if one side saw an AI surveillance action as hostile or aggressive.

- **Develop Public-Private Collaborations for Ethical AI**

The construction of AI is not just a job for states and armies. There needs to be more coordination between government and the private sector so that AI surveillance technologies can be designed and deployed in ethical ways. It is possible to set up a code of conduct on AI

Technologies in the region, so they cannot be used for authoritarian control or oppression, which can minimise civil society's reaction.¹⁹

6. Conclusion

Artificial intelligence-based surveillance, used by the US and Iran, is changing the geopolitics of the Middle East for the better. Through the use of surveillance technology for intelligence, military planning and politics, the two countries are not only making an assertive claim on their territory, they are also aiding an advancing arms race in the region. Surveillance, power, regional security complexes and sovereignty theories give a lot of clues about how the technologies play into the general political landscape and security landscape in the Middle East.²⁰

The US and Iran official policies, based on national security interests, only heighten AI surveillance's influence in interstate relations and regional security.

As each side advances surveillance technology, the potential for accidental spread, sovereignty and human rights violations increases. Such dynamics must be mapped if we want to build a more accurate understanding of Middle Eastern stability and, in general, the global effects of AI-enabled surveillance on international security.

¹⁹ Ethics and 2023, "Ethically Contentious Aspects of Artificial Intelligence Surveillance: A Social Science Perspective."

²⁰ Saleh, Eastern, and 2024, "China-Iran Strategic Partnership and the Future of US Hegemony in the Persian Gulf Region."