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Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)**Proxy wars and Regional Instability: Israel-Iran conflict in the Middle East****Arooba Abbasi**

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ABSTRACT

The confrontation between Israel and Iran in the Middle East has resulted in a complicated web of proxy wars, regional instability, and sectarian tensions. The conflicts between them have far-reaching consequences, affecting not only them but also the entire region. Iran's nuclear weapons development, assistance for militias fighting proxy wars in the region, Israel's illegal settlements inside Palestine, and fighting against Iran's proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Houthi rebels exacerbate the situation and create an instability in the region. This study uses a qualitative analysis of secondary data to analyze the influence of proxy wars on regional stability and its implications for regional security. Within the framework of Regional Security Complex Theory, the findings emphasize the complex dynamics of proxy conflicts, the participation of external actors, and the humanitarian consequences of warfare. This study adds to our understanding of the Israel-Iran conflict and its impact on Middle Eastern stability, emphasizing the necessity for a holistic approach to addressing the underlying reasons driving the conflict.

Keywords: Proxy Wars, Regional Instability, Middle East, Sectarian Tensions.

Introduction

The conflict between Iran and Israel is certainly a struggle for survival for the Iranian regime. Israel nearly destroyed Iran's arms of proxies in the region, so attacking Iran felt like a reasonable step. (Ahmed & Diaaeldin, 2025) For the past few months, the most serious threat to Middle Eastern security has been Israel's far-right government's military adventurism in the Middle East, especially in Palestine, and belief in its ability to impose its will on its enemies through warfare, combined with an effective rejection of negotiations and peaceful solutions. (Hamzawy, 2025)

While the official Israeli narrative portrays the conflict as an effort to destroy Iran's nuclear program, the true motivations seem to be much more expansive. The fundamental tenet of this conflict is the long-held conviction in Israeli strategic circles that Israel faces an existential and ongoing threat from the Islamic Republic. (Ahmed & Diaaeldin, 2025)

Iran's response was also predictable: missiles fired against Israel, targeting military and strategic targets—some of which landed in residential areas. Israel's insistence on extending the conflict, considering Iran's nuclear program an existential threat, and Iran's willingness to resume nuclear talks with the United States when Israeli attacks stopped—a ceasefire proposal—were also not surprising. (Hamzawy, 2025)

The Islamic Republic's regional proxies—the foundation of its regional doctrine, which was largely established following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and Saddam Hussein's demise—are either militarily or politically depleted. (Hamzawy, 2025) Iran has a history of starting proxy wars in the Middle East, using non-state actors as proxies to fight for the Islamic regime. It has historically

relied on a particular type of military adventurism, such as proxy wars in Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen, and, to a lesser extent, Palestine, with the aim of retaining its regional influence. (Hamzawy, 2025) Proxy wars can be defined as conflicts that are instigated by major powers without being directly involved in the war. Great Powers usually use other states and non-state actors as their proxies to fight the battle for them, so that they do not directly engage with each other in combat.

Iran, through its proxies, seeks to discourage Israeli and US attacks on its territory by constantly threatening their interests, as well as to enhance its role in regional crises. Faced with the realities following October 7, 2023, and infliction of devastating damage by Israel on Iran's proxies such as Hezbollah, fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime which used to be a pillar of Iran's regional alliance, and degrading Houthis' missile capabilities, Iran realized that its long-standing strategy was no longer sufficient to protect Iranian security or deter Israeli aggression, allowing Iran to take a strategic shift and open a channel of negotiations with the USA over its nuclear program. (Hamzawy, 2025) The recent aerial bombardment between Israel and Iran, known as the Twelve-Day War, exposed the two countries' decades-long enmity. Israel started the war with an unexpected ground and air attack on important nuclear sites in Iran, which was meant to destroy Iran's nuclear aspirations. In response, Iran launched a series of missile and drone strikes on Israeli cities and military installations. (Live, 2025)

This war was more than just a military conflict; it was a demonstration of intelligence warfare, proxy engagement, and diplomatic maneuvering that will shape the region's strategic calculus for years to come. The question is, what did both parties gain from the conflict? Was the ancient animosity rekindled by this war? To answer the question, we must examine the outcomes of the war for both sides.

During this conflict, Iran chose a do-or-die strategy. Iran solidified its status as a middle power and greatly improved the standing and prestige of its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Israel, on the other hand, maintained aircraft supremacy and used modern mechanisms to eliminate Iran's missile weapons, displaying emerging warfare dynamics that incorporated cyber warfare, intelligence, psychological operations, and precision strikes across numerous domains. (Live, 2025)

Strategically, the conflict highlighted Iran's complex relationship with global powers. Frustrated with Russia's cautious diplomacy, Iran tried to strengthen ties with China, striving for military and technological partnerships while anticipating future geopolitical developments in response to perceived Western aggression. Nonetheless, from a global perspective, Iran responded strongly to Israel, prompting Israeli citizens to hide in bunkers. This made Israel appear as a terrorist state around the world. In contrast, Iran's strikes increased its global prestige, particularly within the global Islamic community, and portrayed it as a hero, but the conflict further triggered the decade-old rivalry between the nations. (Live, 2025)

Research Design:

The current study under consideration adopts a qualitative research design, combining historical analysis with an examination of the current elevated conflict situation between both countries.

Data Collection Methods:

The study uses secondary data sources such as academic journals and books, as well as news articles and reports from credible sources and research publications.

Significance of the study:

The current study contributes to readers' understanding of the complex dynamics of proxy warfare and regional instability in the Middle East, particularly in relation to the Israel-Iran conflict.

Research Questions:

This study will use a qualitative research approach and comprehensive document analysis to address the following questions. 1. How do proxy wars, particularly those involving Israel and Iran, promote regional instability in the Middle East?

2. What is the impact of the Israel-Iran conflict on regional security and stability?

3. What impact does the United States' support for Israel and Iran's funding for militias have in the Middle East?

Literature Review

Thematic analysis focused beyond simply counting phrases or words in a text and also searched for clear and inherent meanings within the data. There were various approaches to conducting thematic analysis, but the most common form follows a six-step process: familiarization, Coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Caulfield, 2020). This research paper has been analyzed into different themes by applying thematic analysis in the literature review, and it is listed below with details:

- **Theme 1: Historical Context and Evolution of Relations**

To understand how the Israel-Iran dispute escalated into outright war in 2025, we must go back to decades, not months or years. Considering that what is currently taking place was not unexpected. This animosity has deep roots, entwined with conflicting Middle East visions, ideology, revolution, and nuclear anxieties. Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Israel and Iran maintained a friendly relationship based on shared geopolitical objectives and common Arab interests in the Middle East.

Iran was among the first Muslim countries to recognize Israel following its establishment in 1948, which makes it the second-largest Islamic country after Turkey to recognize Israel as a state. (Green, 2018). During this time, Israel and Iran maintained strong military and intelligence cooperation. Israel provided logistical and political support to Iran for its security needs, which helped Iran expand its military and intelligence capabilities, resulting in Iran emerging as a significant regional power. (Zarif, 2003).

Relations between the two countries were strained somewhat when Iranian Prime Minister Mohamed Mossadegh accused Israel of relying on the Americans and British, who supported the military coup against the Mossadegh administration in 1953.

Soon after those chaotic years, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's monarchical authority took hold in Iran, allegedly due to his positive relationship with Western powers and Israel. (Maher, 2020) The Iranian shah kept its pro-Western foreign policy and relations with Israel intact, but they were kept under wraps in a calculated move that provided a unique meaning for the phrase "*world realpolitik*." (Rezaei and Cohen, 2014).

- **Theme 2: Ideological and Strategic Difference**

During the 1950s and 1960s, Iran perceived a threat from Soviet-sponsored Pan-Arab nationalism led by Gamal Abdel Nasser. (Green, 2018). Therefore, a mutually beneficial strategic partnership was maintained between the two countries because the motivation behind this alliance was to combat Arab nationalism, particularly in Egypt and Iraq, which were seen as resentful of Israel and Iran.

They collaborated to limit Arab influence in the region, which benefited both sides as they positioned themselves against the Arab revolution. These cordial ties, however, between the two states ended with the Islamic Revolution in Iran, led by Ayatollah Khomeini. This marked the end of the Pahlavism monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. (Ali et al., 2025) With the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty, the rejection of monarchy as un-Islamic, and the establishment of an Islamic Republic that still exists today, the revolution signaled the beginning of a significant period in the interaction between politics and Islam. (Carl Brown, 2000).

- **Theme 3: Nuclear Program and Security Concerns**

Israel views Iran's growing dominance as an existential threat, citing its nuclear ambitions, support for Hezbollah and Palestinian militant groups, and military presence in Syria. The battles between them have taken multiple forms, including cyber operations, targeted killings, economic sanctions, and military conflicts. Recent escalations have heightened regional tensions, raising concerns of a larger conflict. However, these strained relations have sparked significant changes in the regional power dynamics, leading both state and non-state actors to reassess their strategic stances. (Farouki, 2021). Although in the past, despite the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the two countries' strategic interests crossed in the 1980s.

Two examples come to mind: The Iran-Iraq War, which saw Iran engage in open conflict with Iraq. Israel couldn't pass up the opportunity to arm Iran against Iraq. Between 1981 and 1983, it sold an estimated \$500 million worth of armaments to Iran, most of which were paid for oil. In the mid-1980s, Israel sold outdated American weapons to Iran and transferred the proceeds, minus a commission, to contras revolutionaries fighting the socialist regime in Nicaragua, despite a congressional ban on US aid to the contras (Green, 2018). The Arab-Israeli conflict, which began with the Oslo peace process and led to rapprochement between Israel and Arab governments, has impacted Israel's relationship with Iran. (Maher, 2020)

- **Theme 4: Impact on Regional Security Dynamics**

The Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and numerous Arab governments, marked a significant milestone. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco have shifted their foreign policies to prioritize economic development and security cooperation with Israel, citing shared fears over Iran's influence. The emergence of pragmatic collaboration highlights the changing nature of regional alliances and the decline of traditional ideological and sectarian divisions. Iran has strengthened its regional influence by using asymmetric measures, including partnerships with Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Shia militias in Iraq and Yemen. Iran's "Axis of Resistance" network employs hybrid methods to counter enemies' traditional military capabilities, allowing it to project force across borders. (None Hessa Al-Khaled et al., 2025)

The Middle East's security has taken on new significance as a result of this change, since Israel and the Arab neighbors have never worked together as they do today. Iran, on the other hand, sees normalization as a betrayal of the Palestinian cause and a direct challenge to its regional policies. Iran and Israel have both attempted to expand their influence in these territories through military, political, and economic means, but this has only exacerbated the continuous confrontations and rendered the atmosphere insecure, with peace far and distant. (Cohen, 2020).

- **Theme 5: Regional Alliances and Proxy Wars**

Iran's alliance with the "Axis of Resistance" is part of a larger Iranian strategy to overshadow Israel's power in the area, as well as that of Israel's supporters, particularly the USA and Saudi

Arabia. (Mabon,2016) Through the provision of financial, military, and political support to these organizations, Iran has expanded its sphere of influence and become a security concern to Israel. On the other hand, Israel has developed closer ties with the Gulf nations, especially Bahrain and the UAE, since the conditions were normalized in 2020. (Sengupta, 2021)

Several agreements marked a watershed moment in Middle Eastern geopolitics, indicating a greater regional shift toward normalization between Israel and several Arab countries. This growing coordination is predicated on a shared interest in Iranian nuclear interests and regional behaviors, since these Gulf countries have felt threatened by the rise of Iranian influence over their security and stability. Proxy wars and confrontations between Iran and Israel in the Middle East are continually endangering the region's security and reflecting it as a highly volatile and dangerous region, with a constantly shifting geopolitical climate, as determined by recent clashes between both countries.

- **Theme 6: International Involvement and Diplomacy**

Setting aside Israel, a historical review of Iran-US relations reveals that with the Islamic revolution in Iran and with the fall of the Shah of Iran, American influence in the Middle East was substantially eroded. The policy of *"neither East nor West"* was strictly followed by revolutionary Iran, which also fiercely opposed the contemporary bipolar political situation. (Tabatabai, 2020) Many factors led to the Iranian leadership's infuriation, including the taking of US embassy staff as hostages in Tehran and the 1980–1988 Iran–Iraq conflict, U.S. and Western assistance for Iraq, and the July 1988 downing of an Iranian traveler's plane carrying 370 people. (Mohammed and Moorthy, 2020)

Tensions in the two nations' bilateral relations were exacerbated by the use of derogatory terms by the U.S. and Iran against one another at various points in time, such as *"Islamic Fundamentalism," "Rough State,"* and ultimately *"Axis of Evil,"* as well as by Iran as the *"Great Satan."* (Tabatabai, 2020) Despite their intense animosity, the two nations have worked together on some significant issues. For instance, in 2003, the USA eliminated two of Iran's main regional enemies, the Taliban, who posed a religious and political threat in Afghanistan, and Saddam, who posed a security threat to Iran in Iraq. Iran also provided logistical support for U.S. operations in Afghanistan and changed its positions on the U.S.'s involvement in both Afghanistan and Iraq. (Maher, 2020) Nonetheless, the 2002 revelation of Iran's nuclear program introduced a major source of conflict between the two countries.

Both sides' competing positions on the nuclear problem were unconvincing: the US asserted that Iran was pursuing WMDs, while the Iranians argued they had a *"right to make peaceful use of nuclear power under Article IV of the Prohibition of Proliferation Treaty."* Nonetheless, the 2002 revelation of Iran's nuclear program introduced a major source of conflict between the two countries. Both sides' competing positions on the nuclear problem were unconvincing: the US asserted that Iran was pursuing WMDs, while the Iranians argued they had a *"right to make peaceful use of nuclear power under Article IV of the Prohibition of Proliferation Treaty."* (Tehsin, 2017)

This issue has resulted in economic and political sanctions imposed by the USA on Iran, which are still in effect today and putting more strain on Iran's already fragile economy. This significantly deteriorates the US-Iranian relationship. Another reason is that Iran's firm commitment to the *"Axis of Resistance"* has strengthened ties between the US and Israel. Popular support for Iran in

the region was gained by Iran's resistance to US intervention in the Middle East and its ongoing support for Israel.

Iran has identified two regional proxies, Hamas and Hezbollah, to subvert the roles of Israel and America in regional security dynamics. Iranian resistance to the '*Peace Process*', combined with US political and military support for Israel against the Palestinians, strengthened Iran's stance toward the US. (Hussain, 2022) The Natanz nuclear plant in the south of Tehran was the target of Israel's recent strikes, which were initiated by Israel and seriously damaged the core of Iran's nuclear program. Since Iran's nuclear program has been questioned for many years, the recent conflicts have brought these facts to light.

Theoretical Framework

Theoretical frameworks from Security Studies and International Relations can offer important insights into the prospective rivalry between Israel and Iran. Barry Buzan, a British Scholar, introduced the concept of a "*Regional Security Complex*" in his seminal book "*People, States, and Fear*" (1983). Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) can be defined as "a set of states whose security concerns are interlinked due to geographical proximity, shared historical experiences, and cultural affinities". The theory, developed between 1983 and 2003, examines security as a social construct (securitization). This paper proposes examining international security via a regional lens to justify the establishment of world regions.

According to the theory, security is socially constructed rather than an objective phenomenon, and nations may acquire support by categorizing something as an existential threat that requires emergency intervention. (Buzan, 2003) RSCT thus focuses on the intensity of inter-state security relations, patterns of amity and enmity, and power distribution. (Buzan & Wæver, 2003) History, culture, religion, and geography all have an impact on patterns of amity and enmity (Buzan 2003). These patterns influence linkages that can bring governments together and define their cooperation, but they can also justify political or military intervention. (Grabowski, 2020)

Security complexes have been categorized into various classifications. One of them is conflict formation, defined as "a pattern of security interdependence shaped by fear of war and the expectation of violence" (Buzan, 2003). Conflicts arise when major powers in the region engage in violent behavior. In this scenario, governments view one another as possible threats and form alliances to address the security dilemma situation (Buzan, 2003) In the recent confrontation between Israel and Iran, both countries were in a similar condition of conflict creation, where they regarded each other as a potential threat and considered themselves to be in an uncertain situation due to historical animosity. The global powers can have a profound impact on an RSCT. Penetration occurs when an external power interferes with a region's security framework and plays an important role in constructing such structures. (Pobrano z, 2025-07-23 02:51). Penetration happens when outside forces align security interests with states within an RSCT. According to Amitav Acharya, external powers adopt and internalize the function of regional entities in developing regional social structures. External power policies impact regional actors' concepts and behaviors. (Grabowski, 2020)

The Abraham Accords indicate that Gulf Cooperation States (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Bahrain, and Oman) view Iran as their sole adversary in the region. As a result, they formed a security alliance with the US and Israel to counter the common enemy, further exacerbating Sunni-Shiite divisions. Security is another crucial aspect of RSCT. The military, political, economic, social, and environmental sectors are the five primary security domains

identified by the Copenhagen School. Out of them, the military and political spheres are the main areas where nations work to maintain security and deal with the most frequent threats. (Grabowski, 2020) According to securitization theory, actors use security threats to justify extreme measures like military action, shaping security narratives and policies. Israel's manifestation of Iran's nuclear program as an existential threat demonstrates how rhetoric and discourse shape perceptions of security risks.

Similarly, Iran's portrayal of Israel as a rogue state and a terrorist entity, given that Israel assassinated many key Iranian officials in the past and recent conflicts, is another manifestation of securitization, as Iran justifies its actions by arguing that attacking Israel is morally and ethically justified. (Haider et al., 2024) Ideological, religious, and strategic disagreements that have developed over many years are the foundation of Israel and Iran's geopolitical conflict. The involvement of major powers like the United States, Russia, and China has a significant impact on the course of the Israeli-Iranian conflict, which is not isolated from larger global geopolitics. Each of these nations has strategic objectives in the area that impact their activities and how Israel and Iran behave. (Youvan, 2024)

These political and military factors all lead to growing tensions between Israel and Iran. Iran's support for Hamas infuriates Israel, and Israel's unquestioning attachment to the USA is repulsive to Iran. Since Israel has strong defensive countermeasures against Iran and Iran's economic and military vulnerability as a result of sanctions, retaliation is ineffective, reinforcing the security dilemma and the securitization in the Middle East. Iran's clandestine efforts to strengthen its nuclear weapons programme would profoundly disrupt the regional balance of power, resulting in instability and uncertainty in the Middle East. Though the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a nuclear deal agreed in 2018 between Iran and the US, has curtailed Iran's nuclear goals, regional unrest and disorder persisted as a result of Iran's more horrific Uranium enrichment.

Conclusion and Analysis

Throughout history, in the Middle East, the conflict between Israel and Iran has resulted in a complicated web of proxy wars, sectarian conflicts, and regional instability. Although long-term animosity between Israel and Iran was sparked by their divergent ideologies, the military conflicts and transgressions have been the main cause of this conflict's smoldering for decades.

The recent attacks on each other indicate a substantial escalation in the continuing conflict between Israel and Iran, far exceeding past conflicts involving Israel and Hamas. This confrontation has far-reaching consequences, affecting not only them as perpetrators but also increasing the ongoing cruelty and genocide in Gaza, and further destabilizing the region.

According to historical analysis, as outlined in the Literature Review, the two countries had quite cordial relations with each other. Conflicting interests, ideologies, and security concerns are the main causes of the Israeli Iranian conflict. Iran views Israel as a rogue state that aims to safeguard its political interests and sphere of influence in the area, while Israel views Iran's nuclear program as a threat to its security.

Israel has long been enraged by the Iran-USA nuclear agreement (JCPOA). This is why, when Israel's lobbying went successful and the US withdrew from the agreement in 2018, Israel hailed it greatly. Israel has consistently accused Iran of aiding Hamas and militants in the region and criticized the "Axis of Resistance." Iran, on the other hand, has consistently resisted and countered Israel's increasing influence after the Islamic Revolution; it saw Israel as an illegal rogue state in the region and has worked to counter its actions in the Middle East.

The recent conflicts between them have their roots in a number of important Middle Eastern events, including the assassination of Iranian army general Qassem Soleimani and Israel's public celebration of it in December 2023, Israel's increased ground offensives in the Gaza Strip that increased the number of refugees and the death toll, and a suspected Israeli airstrike on the Iranian embassy compound in Damascus in 2024 that killed seven Islamic Revolutionary Guard officers. Israel has always considered a nuclear-armed Iran as an intolerable threat.

Tel Aviv has constantly warned that the concern is not only what Iran would do with such a weapon, but also what it would signify for the region: a potential nuclear arms race in the Middle East, empowered Iranian proxy militias, and increased overall instability. As tensions between Israel and Iran worsen, it is not just the two countries at the center of the conflict that are feeling the heat.

The possible political, military, and economic impact is not limited to the Middle East, but it has global significance because several significant actors, including the United States and Saudi Arabia, actively contributed to easing recent tensions between the two countries. While the fighting has primarily involved Israel, Iran, and various proxy militias operating in Gaza, Lebanon, and Syria, there are signs that the conflict may expand. The recent clashes between Iranian-backed Houthi rebels and US forces in Yemen and the overthrow of the Asaad regime in Syria are signs of escalating tensions between the two countries.

Certain angles of the conflict must be considered. Arab states, particularly those under the Abraham Accords, have grown closer to Israel in recent years, particularly in terms of economic and intelligence cooperation, despite the fact that public opinion in many of these countries remains broadly sympathetic to the Palestinians. However, because these are monarchical states, public opinion and mass narrative have little impact on government decisions.

Also, we must not forget the decade-long sectarian divide between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which has brought Saudi Arabia closer to Israel while moving away from Iran. There is also an economic dimension, as Iran controls the shipping routes in the Persian Gulf, which are a critical chokepoint for world energy supplies and might cause global oil prices to fluctuate. If tensions between Israel and Iran worsen, energy markets could see substantial shocks, potentially affecting global inflation, particularly in energy-importing countries.

The most dangerous possibility, however, is a full-fledged regional conflict. It is impossible to rule out this possibility, particularly in the event of a significant occurrence, such as widespread civilian casualties or a successful attack on a strategic Iranian or Israeli city. Since Iran already suffers from the loss of key officials and scientists, if tensions rise, the conflict could involve multiple regional and global actors, with devastating consequences for regional stability and the global economy.

Recommendations

Since the regional instability caused by the Israel-Iran conflict has serious consequences, it is critical to take a multifaceted approach to dealing with this issue. Among the strategies may be:

1. Increased diplomacy and strategic initiatives to address and resolve the underlying issues driving the conflict, such as Iran's nuclear program and Israel's security concerns.
2. To foster a more favorable environment for negotiations by incorporating important parties who may then address the underlying reasons of the issue and find a solution, thus fostering regional discussion.

3. International organizations play a significant role as well. An international body should involve the important regional actors and concerned global actors, such as the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council members can cooperate to resolve the issue.
4. The era of war-related alliances has long passed; a new era of trade-oriented relations has emerged, in which strong economic links and diplomatic partnerships build the new international order, which is entirely dependent on strong trade and economic cooperation with one another. Political instability, regional instability, and security threats all endanger economic prospects. It is critical that Iran and Israel recognize this and work together to strengthen their economic and trade relations.

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