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Analytical Review

**WAR BEHIND THE WAR: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL
INSTITUTIONAL AND ANALYTICAL STUDY OF IRAN–
UNITED STATES–ISRAEL TENSIONS IN THE MIDDLE
EAST**

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Running title: Greater Israel narrative, regional escalation, and
Middle East strategic insecurity

Abstract

The ongoing tensions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States in the Middle East extend far beyond missile strikes, drone operations, or limited military clashes. They represent a complex multi-dimensional geopolitical system. This analytical review examines the conflict through neorealist, constructivist, and geo-economic frameworks, covering security and nuclear dimensions, Israel’s strategic role, narrative warfare, economic sanctions, and ideological confrontation. Historical evidence, the legacy of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the “maximum pressure” policy, and major developments from 2024–2026—including the Twelve-Day War of June 2025 and Operation Epic Fury (launched 28 February 2026)—demonstrate that these tensions are not merely accidental but part of a structured strategic balance. The concept of “controlled escalation” previously explained how “invisible wars” maintained a managed equilibrium of power. However, the 2026 escalation, which included the assassination of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has challenged this framework and shifted the region toward open conflict.

Keywords: Iran–United States relations, geopolitics, nuclear proliferation, economic sanctions, narrative warfare, ideological conflict, Middle East security, proxy warfare, controlled escalation

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Data Synthesis and Analysis

Data were synthesized using meta-analysis (fixed/random effects) with heterogeneity assessed by I^2 and Cochran's Q. Where pooling was not feasible, narrative and thematic syntheses were applied. Network meta-analysis and meta-regression were conducted where appropriate, in accordance with PRISMA and Cochrane guidelines.

Introduction:

The Middle East has long functioned as the epicenter of global power struggles, where contests over energy resources, strategic chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz, ideological supremacy, and territorial influence intersect to form an intricate web of alliances, rivalries, and proxy confrontations. The Iran–United States–Israel triangle exemplifies this complexity. Reducing the conflict to overt military actions—missile barrages, drone swarms, or naval maneuvers—obscures its deeper essence. Beneath the surface lies an invisible yet decisive “war behind the war,” a multi-domain struggle encompassing narrative dominance, economic strangulation, cyber sabotage, ideological propagation, and the orchestration of non-state actors. This phenomenon represents a classical manifestation of hybrid warfare in the 21st century, where visible kinetic engagements serve merely as the tip of a strategic iceberg.

This analytical review posits that the tensions are neither accidental nor episodic but constitute a structured, institutionalized contest for regional hegemony and global order reconfiguration. Drawing on extensive historical records, declassified policy documents, economic metrics, and real-time conflict data up to April 2026, the study illuminates how neorealist power-balancing imperatives, constructivist identity-based narratives, and geo-economic weaponization of resources converge to sustain perpetual friction. Recent escalations, particularly the February 2026 U.S.-Israeli campaign that eliminated Supreme Leader Khamenei and dismantled key Iranian capabilities, have transitioned the conflict from “controlled escalation” to existential brinkmanship, with cascading effects on global energy security, humanitarian conditions, and great-power rivalries involving Russia and China.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in three complementary theoretical lenses that collectively explain the conflict's multi-dimensionality

- **Neorealism** (Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, 1979): In an anarchic international system, states pursue survival through balance-of-power strategies. Iran's nuclear ambitions and proxy network represent defensive responses to perceived U.S.-Israeli encirclement, while Washington and Tel Aviv seek to prevent any single actor from dominating energy routes or acquiring weapons of mass destruction.
- **Constructivism** (Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 1999): Identities and narratives are socially constructed and shape behavior. Iran frames itself as a “resistance axis” against Western imperialism; the U.S. and Israel portray Iran as a rogue state threatening global norms. Media and social platforms amplify these competing realities, blurring facts and perceptions.
- **Geo-economics**: Economic tools—sanctions, oil embargoes, and trade disruptions—function as primary weapons. U.S. sanctions have deliberately targeted Iran's revenue streams, while Iran counters through shadow fleets, cryptocurrency, and alliances with China and Russia.
- These frameworks intersect to reveal how the conflict operates simultaneously across material, ideational, and economic planes.

Historical Background and Balance of Power

The 1979 Iranian Revolution marked a seismic shift, transforming Iran from a U.S. ally into an ideological challenger. Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of exporting the Islamic Revolution directly confronted American interests in securing Persian Gulf oil and containing Soviet (later Russian) influence. The subsequent Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) solidified Iran's reliance on asymmetric warfare and proxy networks.

Post-Cold War, the U.S. maintained a forward presence through bases in Gulf states and alliances with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Iran's response evolved into the “Axis of Resistance,” a network of non-state actors designed to extend influence without direct conventional confrontation. The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq inadvertently empowered Shia militias aligned with Tehran, while the 2011 Arab Spring and Syrian civil war further entrenched Iranian footholds. The JCPOA (2015) offered a brief détente, with Iran capping enrichment in exchange for sanctions relief. However, the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 under President Trump revived “maximum pressure,” accelerating Iran's nuclear breakout time and proxy activism. By October 2025, following the Twelve-Day War, Iran formally terminated the JCPOA.

The 2024 direct strikes (April and October) broke the proxy-only taboo, setting the stage for 2025–2026's open warfare. Throughout, the balance of power has hinged on deterring Iranian nuclearization while preserving U.S. hegemony over global energy flows.

Military and Security Dimensions

Iran's military posture emphasizes asymmetric capabilities: a vast ballistic missile arsenal (estimated thousands of short- and medium-range systems), advanced drone fleets, cyber units, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force. These are complemented by an extensive proxy network forming the Axis of Resistance.

Key proxies include: Hezbollah in Lebanon (tens of thousands of rockets, battle-hardened from Syria); Houthis in Yemen (Red Sea shipping attacks); Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militias; and Palestinian groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. This network enables

Iran to project power across multiple theaters, creating a “forward defense” that deters direct attacks by threatening retaliation everywhere.



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Figure 1: Iran's Military Bases and Reach This map illustrates Iran's network of military bases (navy, army, air force), areas of influence, and proxy forces (Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, Houthis, Hamas, etc.) across the Middle East and Central Asia. **Source:** Institute for the Study of War (ISW) – <https://understandingwar.org/map/iran-and-the-axis-of-resistance/> (2024 public map).

The U.S. and Israel view Iran's nuclear program—enriching to near-weapons-grade levels by 2025—as the paramount threat. Deterrence dynamics have historically prevented all-out war, yet the June 2025 Twelve-Day War and February 2026 Operation Epic Fury demonstrated the limits of restraint. The latter operation crippled Iran's air defenses, nuclear sites, and leadership, prompting Iranian counterstrikes that closed the Strait of Hormuz temporarily and struck Gulf infrastructure.

Israel's Role and Regional Dynamics

Israel perceives Iran as an existential threat due to its nuclear program, missile reach, and support for anti-Israel proxies encircling its borders. Israeli doctrine favors preemptive strikes, as evidenced by operations in Syria (targeting IRGC assets), the 2024 direct exchanges, the 2025 Twelve-Day War, and participation in 2026's Epic Fury. This partnership allows the U.S. to maintain plausible deniability while leveraging Israel's intelligence and strike precision. The

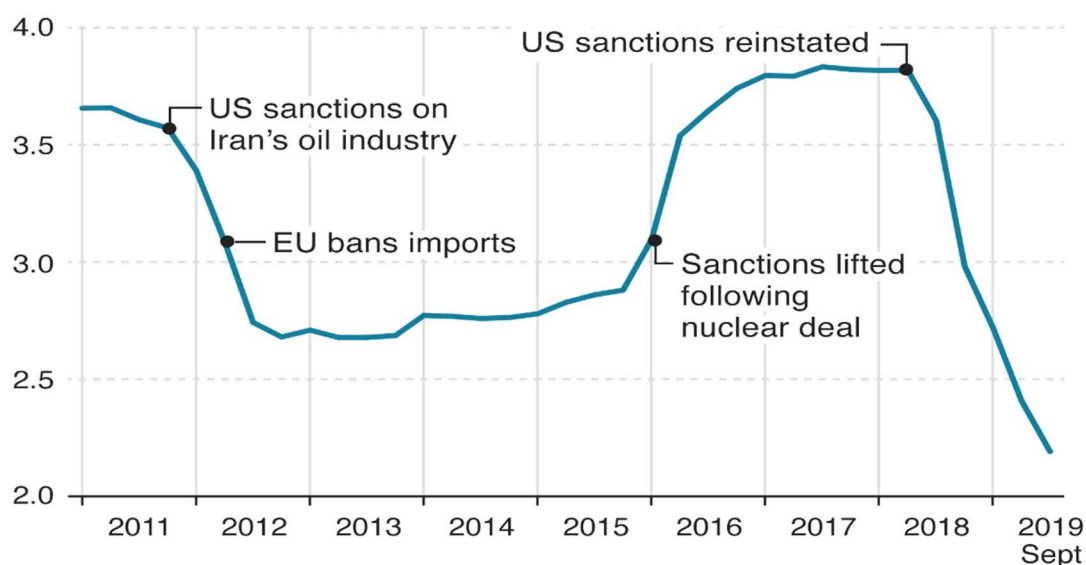
relationship is symbiotic: Israel gains U.S. diplomatic cover; America avoids sole ownership of regional enforcement.

Narrative Warfare and the Role of Media

Beyond kinetics, narrative control shapes legitimacy and international support. Western outlets often frame U.S.-Israeli actions as “defensive” or “precision strikes against threats,” while Iranian responses are labeled “provocative escalation.” Conversely, Iranian state media and aligned influencers portray the conflict as resistance against imperialism, amplifying unverified claims of civilian casualties and AI-generated imagery of resilience. Social media amplifies this “information warfare,” with both sides flooding platforms to influence global opinion, diaspora communities, and policy makers.

Iran's oil output

Production in millions of barrels per day



Data to September 2019

Source: OPEC

BBC

[ichef.bbc.co.uk](https://www.bbc.com/news/business-49700018)

Figure 2: Iran's Oil Output This line chart shows Iran's daily oil production (in millions of barrels) from 2011 to September 2019, highlighting sharp declines due to U.S. sanctions (2012 and 2018) and temporary recovery after the JCPOA. **Source:** BBC News / OPEC data – <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-49700018> (and related 2019 sanctions reports).

Economic Warfare and Sanctions

U.S. sanctions, intensified since 2018, have devastated Iran's economy. Oil exports plummeted over 60% post-reimposition, contributing to GDP contraction, inflation exceeding 40%, currency devaluation, and middle-class erosion (estimated 12–17 percentage point annual decline 2012–2019). By 2024, per capita GDP had fallen from \$8,000 (2012) to around \$5,000. Iran adapted via shadow fleets, Chinese barter deals, and crypto, but cumulative losses reached tens of billions

annually. The 2026 war has compounded this through infrastructure damage and Hormuz disruptions

Ideological Conflict and Identity Politics

Iran positions itself as the vanguard of anti-hegemonic resistance, championing Shia causes and opposing Western liberalism. The U.S. and Israel embody defense of a rules-based order and Jewish state security. This clash permeates societies, mobilizing domestic support and transnational networks while complicating peace efforts.

Proxy Warfare, Hybrid Threats, and the Axis of Resistance

Iran's Quds Force has invested hundreds of millions annually in proxies, enabling low-cost power projection. Hezbollah alone fields over 130,000 rockets; Houthis have disrupted global shipping. In 2026, these groups activated in solidarity—Hezbollah opening a northern front against Israel, Houthis launching missiles—yet suffered heavy Israeli retaliation. Cyber elements (Stuxnet precedents evolving into mutual sabotage) and hybrid tactics (disinformation, assassinations) further blur war-peace lines.

Controlled Escalation, Operation Epic Fury, and the Shift to Open War

Pre-2026, “controlled escalation” allowed calibrated strikes that signaled resolve without total war. The February 28, 2026, U.S.-Israeli operation shattered this: massive airstrikes killed Khamenei, destroyed nuclear and missile assets, and prompted Iranian missile/drone retaliation across nine countries. Successor Mojtaba Khamenei assumed power amid chaos. The war's first month saw thousands dead, millions displaced, and global energy shocks.

Humanitarian, Environmental, and Global Repercussions

Civilian casualties, refugee crises (especially in Lebanon and Iran), environmental damage from oil fires, and economic ripple effects (oil price surges) have globalized the conflict. Russia and China have provided diplomatic and material support to Iran, while Gulf states face direct threats.

Discussion

This multi-dimensional system reveals great powers' preference for managed instability favoring their interests. Beneficiaries include defense industries and energy speculators; losers encompass civilians and regional stability. The 2026 war questions whether escalation was inevitable or strategically engineered.

Future Scenarios and Policy Recommendations

Scenarios range from prolonged attrition to negotiated ceasefires brokered by Oman or China. Recommendations: revive multilateral talks acknowledging all parties' security red lines; phased sanctions relief tied to verifiable de-nuclearization and proxy restraint; and inclusive regional security architecture.

Conclusion

The Iran-U.S.-Israel conflict epitomizes “war behind the war”—a layered contest where military sparks ignite deeper economic, narrative, and ideological fires. The 2025–2026 escalations, culminating in Operation Epic Fury and Khamenei's death, have upended controlled dynamics,

demanding urgent, holistic diplomacy. Only mutual acknowledgment of existential fears and comprehensive dialogue can restore equilibrium and prevent further catastrophe.

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Ethical Statement

This is a research-based manuscript prepared and structured in a scientific narrative review format. Modern AI-assisted tools were used to access current and authentic information from digital archives, bibliographic databanks, online libraries, research articles, academic repositories, and encyclopedias.

Preprint Notice

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Literature Search and Information Management

Literature retrieval was conducted using a structured and reproducible search strategy in accordance with PRISMA-S reporting standards. Search strategies were independently evaluated using the PRESS framework to ensure methodological quality, accuracy, and completeness. Grey literature was systematically identified using the CADTH *Grey Matters* framework to enhance coverage of unpublished, non-indexed, and policy-relevant sources, thereby minimizing publication bias and improving evidence comprehensiveness.

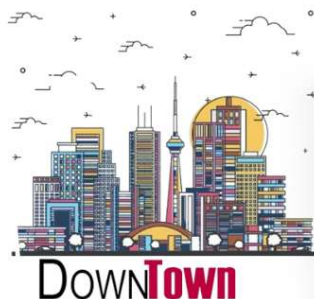
Risk of Bias and Evidence Quality

Risk of bias was assessed using validated, design-specific tools (RoB 2, ROBINS-I, QUADAS-2/3, AMSTAR 2, Newcastle–Ottawa Scale, and CASP). The certainty of evidence and strength of recommendations were evaluated using the GRADE framework, ensuring a standardized and reproducible assessment across study designs.

Review Typology and Reporting

Review designs were classified into standard categories (scoping, umbrella, rapid, qualitative, and mixed-methods), with reporting aligned to established guidelines (PRISMA-ScR, PRIOR, PRISMA-RR, ENTREQ, and PRISMA/MMAT) to ensure methodological rigor and transparency.





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