

Shifting Sands: How Iran's Nuclear Ambitions Transform Middle Eastern Alliances

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Published 27th January 2025

Abstract

This article explores the significant impact that Iran's nuclear ambitions have had on the transformation of Middle Eastern regional alliances. It explores how Iran's quest for nuclear weapons has shifted the balance of power and led to developments among major powers including Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates, using a realist paradigm. The study illustrates how regional and global players' interests meet and diverge by examining historical context, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action's (JCPOA) disintegration, and the evolving geopolitical landscape. Research suggests that in addition to provoking security concerns, Iran's nuclear program has sparked previously unprecedented cooperation, such as the Abraham Accords, along with potential arms races by other nations. These events underline the challenges of diplomacy, the likelihood of a nuclear escalation, and the broader ramifications for international governance and Middle Eastern stability. This study provides insight into the strategic decisions made by nations when confronting a region, at the crossroads of conflict and change.

Keywords: Iran Nuclear Program, Middle Eastern Alliances, JCPOA, Realism in International Relations, Regional Security, Abraham Accords, Middle East Politics, Israel, Balance of Power, Nuclear Proliferation

I. Introduction

The Middle East has long been a region defined by complex geopolitical dynamics, where power struggles and alliances shift constantly, with the tide of regional ambitions and international pressures. The geopolitical environment prior to the 2000s was marked by fierce competition between major actors, such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iraq, and Iran, who were all fighting for domination following crucial events like the Cold War, the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and the Gulf War in 1990-1991.

The interests of global superpowers, especially the United States and the Soviet Union, which viewed the Middle East as a vital battleground for exerting global influence, had a significant impact on regional politics during this period of time. Early on, Iran was a lesser player in the Middle East's power structure, due to its strategic position at the intersection of the East and the West.

¹Although its impact was acknowledged, the region did not see a significant shift of alliances until Iran's nuclear ambitions emerged in the early 1980s (post Israel's invasion of Lebanon with the creation of Hezbollah), a shift primarily due to concerns over a nuclear-capable Iran.

Iran's nuclear ambitions became a focal point of concern amongst both regional and international actors, such as Saudi Arabia and the United States, as the country's intentions were questioned. Were Iran's nuclear developments a question of increased security? Global recognition? Or could they be analyzed as a threat, a strong play to achieve regional hegemony, eliminating their adversaries inside the region in the process?

The Iranian government maintains that having nuclear technology strengthens its position as a major state actor in the region and abroad, in addition to improving national security. Yet this nuclear trajectory makes countries in the international stage, especially those with tense and rival relations with Iran, uneasy about their possibilities. In response to Iran's nuclear program, Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Saudi Arabia have all adjusted their diplomatic objectives and established new alliances to combat Iran's perceived threat.

The question this paper aims to answer is 'How have Iran's nuclear ambitions influenced the transformation of regional alliances in the Middle East?'

¹ Ansari, Ali M. *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust*. Columbia University Press, 2006.

In addressing this question, this essay will explore alliances that have significantly shifted, broken down, or emerged in response to Iran's nuclear program, notably the (i) UAE- Israel Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) of 2022 and ii) the evolving stance of Saudi Arabia. We will also explore the reason behind Iran's nuclear developments and security concerns. These diplomatic and strategic relations play a vital role in the Middle East's geopolitics and in shaping future discourses. As regional players focus on establishing security-focused partnerships over longstanding ideological divisions due to perceived threats, international relations evolve and work to fill the gap on why historical dynamics shape contemporary politics.

II. Historical Context: Iran's Security Concerns and Regional Dynamics

2.1 Pre-2000s Iranian Political Landscape

Iran's domestic and regional stance was drastically altered by the historic Iranian Revolution of 1979. Iran rejected Western influence and embraced an Islamic-based administration model² when it overthrew Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's pro-Western monarchy and established the Islamic Republic. Iran's foreign policy was transformed by this ideological shift, which placed a stronger emphasis on combating Western influence—

² Moshiri, Fariborz. "The Islamic Revolution and Regional Conflict." *Middle East Journal*, 43(3), 1989: 389-404.

especially American influence— and on spreading its revolutionary values to its neighboring countries.³

The revolution also set the stage for Iran's realist policies, as the newly Islamic Republic faced opposition, both within the country and internationally. Ethnic minorities and Shah loyalist groups presented difficulties within the country, while Iran's revolutionary fervor was seen as disruptive by its neighbors, especially Iraq under the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein. A long history of border disputes, sunni politics that dominated Iraq and unrest that the Iranian Revolution would inspire insurgency among Iraq's Shia majority, (which had long been suppressed), as well as the struggle of power amongst both countries to become the leading Persian Gulf State, culminated in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).⁴

When in war, Iran capitalized on their vulnerabilities and its government prioritized self-reliance when it came to their defense capabilities. The eight-year conflict left Iran in economic debt, militarily drained, and incredibly aware of its vulnerabilities. Post war, Iran prioritized their goal of prevention against future conflicts, invasions, and wanted to secure themselves from foreign troops and interference. This was the basis that drove Iran's nuclear aspirations.

By the 2000s, Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program—which it described as essential for both deterrence and upholding its revolutionary values in a hostile region—was driven by their record of insecurity and ideological determination.

2.2 Post-2000s: The emergence of Nuclear Ambitions

Iran started pursuing a nuclear program in the early 2000s, claiming it was a harmless initiative aimed at producing energy and stimulating technological advancement and growth in the country. Nevertheless, suspicions quickly emerged among the international community and surrounding nations, who saw Iran's nuclear advancements as a clandestine effort to acquire nuclear weapons capacity. Tensions increased, and concerns about potential non-compliance with the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)⁵ were triggered in 2002, when undisclosed nuclear facilities in Iran were discovered.⁶ In response to Iran's nuclear ambitions, the United States, European Union, and United Nations swiftly implemented a series of diplomatic and economic sanctions.

The UN Security Council issued sanctions aimed at Iran's access to nuclear resources, technology and materials, hoping to halt Iran's nuclear development. These sanctions included a series of resolutions, including

³ International Center on Nonviolent Conflict. "Iranian Revolution (1977-1979)." n.d. Accessed October 28, 2024. <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/iranian-revolution-1977-1979/>.

⁴ Renfrew, Nita M. "Who Started the War?" *Foreign Policy*, no. 66 (1987): 98–108. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148666>.

⁵ Sagan, Scott D. "Why Do States Build Nuclear Weapons? Three Models in Search of a Bomb." *International Security*, 21(3), 1996/97: 54-86.

⁶ Albright, David, and Andrea Stricker. *Iran's Perilous Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons*. Institute for Science and International Security, 2021.

UN Security Council Resolution 1737 (2006), which “imposes sanctions on Iran for failing to stop its uranium enrichment programme following resolution 1696 (2006); imposes a ban the supply of nuclear-related technology and materials and imposes assets freeze on key individuals and companies related to the enrichment programme.”⁷ This was followed by Resolution 1747 (2007), which imposed sanctions on arms supply amongst individuals connected to Iran’s nuclear efforts.

The United States and the European Union enforced stricter regulations. The US imposed the Iran Sanctions Act⁸, targeting Iran’s central bank, restricting oil exports, and dissuading foreign companies from investing in Iran’s oil and gas sectors. The European Union carried out an oil embargo back in 2012, restricted Iranian banks dealings as well, and removed Iranian financial institutions from SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications) an international payment system that effectively isolated Iran from worldwide financial networks, severely impacting its economic development.⁹

As stated, we can observe that through these sanctions the international community aimed to pressure Iran into compliance, by severely hindering their economic growth

⁷ Security Council. “Security Council Resolution 1737.” United. <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/s/res/1737-%282006%22>.

⁸ “IRAN SANCTIONS ACT OF 1996 [As Amended Through P.L. 114–277, Enacted December 15, 2016] Be it enacted by the Senate and House.” 2016. Office of Foreign Assets Control. <https://ofac.treasury.gov/media/5751/download?inline>.

⁹ Nephew, Richard. *The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field*. Columbia University Press, 2017.

and financial gains, looking to absolutely halt Iran’s nuclear ambitions by crippling its ability to finance them. This multilateral effort reflected the international community’s concern, and what a threat a nuclear capable Iran meant to them. Yet these measures only succeeded in feeding into Iran’s sense of encirclement, and adding into the hostility they felt towards the West.

Among these international pressures, Iran also faced covert operations aimed at sabotaging their nuclear infrastructure. An incredibly significant attack was the Stuxnet cyberattack in 2010, believed to have been developed as a joint operation between U.S. and Israeli intelligence services, a malware operation designed to cause centrifuges to fail¹⁰ while providing readings to their operators that they were running normally. This attack demonstrated the length that international actors were willing to go to in order to stop Iran from becoming a nuclear power. Even though the aftermath included setbacks, it only increased Iran’s drive to continue its nuclear development, stating it as necessary for the country’s defense.

Iran’s nuclear pursuits are additionally mostly driven by security concerns in the region. Iran is encircled by US military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, has to face the monopoly that Israel has over the region, and bears the consequences of the Iran-Iraq War. As a result, Iran has become more cautious about forming alliances in the

¹⁰ Lindsay, Jon R. “Stuxnet and the Limits of Cyber Warfare.” *Security Studies*, 22(3), 2013: 365–404.

region and considers nuclear weapons crucial for deterrence. By developing nuclear capabilities, Iran aims to position itself as a major regional power, deter possible threats, and enhance its negotiating power, particularly with Western nations. Consequently, Iran sees nuclear advancement as a way to secure its safety and achieve political stability in a challenging and hostile environment. Despite facing international opposition, economic sanctions, and covert actions, Iran has persisted in its nuclear development efforts.

2.2 Geopolitical Tensions and the Role of Other Nuclear Powers in the Region

Israel and Saudi Arabia, Iran's primary adversaries in the region, have played key roles over the years in shaping Iran's nuclear ambitions by challenging its security concerns and fueling regional competition.¹¹ In what has been described as the new Arab cold war, Saudi Arabia, which has for long fought Iran for control of the Muslim world, sees a nuclear-armed Iran as a serious threat to its hegemony in the Gulf. And although the Iran-Iraq War remains as the most recent instance of a direct armed conflict between an Arab country and Iran, both states still engage in open hostility, although they continue on in peaceful coexistence. Saudi Arabia has strengthened its relations with the United States and other Western countries and pursued its own nuclear energy projects over concern of Iran's regional status.

The state of Israel, on the other hand, has long been an adversary to Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, where Iran's new government formed an anti-zionist stance, stating Israel's existence was incompatible with Islamic principles of the republic. Its government has long since framed Israel as a symbol of Western imperialism in the Middle East. Additionally, Iran has positioned themselves with extremist groups that counter Israeli interests, such as Hezbollah. Since then, Israel and Iran relations and conflict have only escalated significantly, contributing to the state of war both countries participate in now.

In response to such standpoints, Israel has responded with a multifaceted strategy to counter Iran's nuclear program such as military strikes (The October 2024 airstrikes to deter nuclear infrastructure)¹², cover operations, diplomatic pressure (lobbying with international bodies and nations to isolate Iran from the international community), as well as collaborating with Western powers and intelligence agencies to provide information on Iran's activities in the region. Together with Saudi Arabia, Israel and their combined pressures have made Iran's sense of vulnerability heighten, which may have strengthened its determination to develop a nuclear arsenal as a deterrent and to secure its place in the region.

III. The Iran Nuclear Deal: Milestone or Misstep?

¹¹ Inbar, Efraim. 2020. "Iran and Israel: The Inevitable War?" SIRIUS – Zeitschrift Für Strategische Analysen 4 (4): 524–30. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sirius-2020-4007>.

¹² Cohen, Avner. *The Worst-Kept Secret: Israel's Bargain with the Bomb*. Columbia University Press, 2010.

3.1 *The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)*

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), widely also known as the Iran Nuclear Deal, was signed in Vienna 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 group— United States, France, United Kingdom, Russia, China, and Germany. The agreement aimed to deter Iran’s nuclear development and capabilities, in exchange from lifting economic sanctions that had impacted Iran’s economy.¹³

With such an agreement, Iran agreed to limit its uranium production to 3.67%, which is increasingly below the 90% level needed for weaponization, and to reduce its stockpile of uranium by 98%. Additionally, Iran committed to dismantling two-thirds of its centrifuges, committed to modifying its Arak heavy-water reactor to prevent the production of weaponry plutonium and to provide unprecedented access to its nuclear facilities and supply chain, monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).¹⁴

Although widely supported by the international community at first, the deal, in time, began to receive mixed reactions. Many viewed it as a milestone in the diplomatic area, as it halted Iran’s nuclear efforts and promoted regional stability. China and Russia, which are

key players in the JCPOA, strongly supported the agreement, as they argued it was the key framework and one of the few diplomatic ways that they could prevent escalation in the Middle East, and strengthen their non-proliferation (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)) norms. Both countries stressed the importance of diplomacy over confrontation, as it was in both states’ interest to maintain economic ties with Iran, protecting their regional interests.

However, critics countered that the agreement was a mistake, especially the US and Israel. They asserted that although Iran received financial relief from the JCPOA, its nuclear infrastructure remained intact, allowing for the potential for further nuclear developments. They argued that, “The deal fails to guarantee the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program—rather, it gives Iran a clear pathway to nuclear weapons.”¹⁵ Furthermore, some worried that Iran would someday resume enrichment activities again were stoked by the deal's "sunset clauses," which remove certain restrictions after ten to fifteen years.

So while the JCPOA marked a key diplomatic achievement, the international community is still divided as to if it tested out its purpose of deterring nuclear ambitions, or if it simply postponed the inevitable confrontation that was to come.

3.2 *US Withdrawal and Iran’s Partial Withdrawal*

¹⁵ United Against Nuclear Iran. “The Iran Nuclear Deal: What’s Wrong With It And What Can We Do Now?” *UANI*. <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/iran-nuclear-deal>.

¹³ Mohamad Amine El Khalfi. 2020. “Agreement on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (Jcpoa) between Iran and the United States.” *Jurnal Pembaharuan Hukum* 7 (2): 183–89. <https://doi.org/10.26532/jph.v7i2.11296>.

¹⁴ “The Historic Deal that Will Prevent Iran from Acquiring a Nuclear Weapon | The White House.” n.d. Obama White House. Accessed October 16, 2024. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/iran-deal>.

“We cannot prevent an Iranian bomb under the decaying and rotten structure of the current agreement,” stated President Donald Trump when withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2018, a move that significantly escalated tensions in the Middle East.¹⁶

President Trump’s pullout made this agreement in name only, even if the other P5+1 countries were still involved, there was no way to actually know what the Iranians would do. Would they adhere to the deal, or slowly chip away at the deal’s restrictions, developing a nuclear arsenal over time? President Trump criticized the deal as inefficient and flawed, arguing that it failed to address Iran’s ballistic missile developments and the sunset clauses that would eventually lift key restrictions, as well as compromising regional influence, as well as its support for violent militias around the Middle East.

After withdrawing from the deal, the United States reimposed even stricter sanctions on Iran by the The Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) which greatly compromised Iran. The US imposed stringent economic sanctions that targeted their banking sector, oil exports, and other vital sectors that were meant to place the maximum pressure on Iran to get back to the negotiating table, but instead achieved the opposite results and managed to have destabilizing effects in the Middle East.

Aside from straining US relations with European allies, the withdrawal succeeded in aggravating tensions with regional adversaries as Israel and Saudi Arabia, who feared that Iran would resume its nuclear activities and resurface as a nuclear threat. The sharp sanctions reimposed by the US led to a decline in oil revenue, economic activity, and increased inflation within Iranian territory and its citizens, further reinforcing the idea of western evil believed by Iran and creating anti-US sentiment, which feeds into the conflict happening today.¹⁷

In response to the US withdrawal and its sanctions, Iran minimized its compliance with the agreements stated in the JCPOA. From 2019, Iran grew its stockpile of enriched uranium and progressively raised its uranium enrichment levels above the JCPOA’s 3.67% limit. They also signaled a return to nuclear development by restarting enrichment at previously prohibited locations and installing sophisticated centrifuges.

¹⁶ Beauchamp, Zack. 2018. “Iran nuclear deal: Trump’s withdrawal, explained.” Vox. <https://www.vox.com/world/2018/5/8/17328520/iran-nuclear-deal-trump-withdraw>.

¹⁷ “The Impact of Sanctions Two Years After U.S. Withdrawal From the Nuclear Deal.” 2020. FDD. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/05/06/sanctions-impact-two-years-after-jcpoa-withdrawal/>.

Iran's Nuclear Facilities



Fig. 1: Iran's Nuclear Facilities
Source: Council on Foreign Relations, 2023.

Iranian officials presented these measures as a response to US incitements, but they also put pressure on European countries to lessen the sanctions or come up with other ways to provide Iran with economic relief.

Following the wavering of the Iran Nuclear Deal both by the United States and Iran, international actors have worried about a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, raising concerns over major regional powers and potential confrontations in the region and their impact.

3.3 Impact on Regional Alliances

The breakdown of the JCPOA had a remarkable impact on regional alliances, strengthening partnerships

and accelerating new diplomatic relations. As the threat of a nuclear capable Iran emerged, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ran to strengthen their security collaborations and alliances. These countries that have been historically wary of each other, found common ground on countering Iranian hegemony, and leading to a historic transformation on regional alliances. One major outcome of these newly formed partnerships were the Abraham Accords in 2020, establishing greater relations between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, followed by similar agreements with Morocco and Sudan. The Abraham Accords were a game changer for the Middle East, both in economic collaboration and intelligence advancements, yet also influenced in setting the stage in alliances when it came to potential conflict, particularly with Iran. The accords set a vital framework to counterbalancing Iran's regional influence and increasing nuclear threat.¹⁸

The collapse of the JCPOA has brought Saudi Arabia closer to Western and Israeli security interests, even if it has not yet formally normalized relations with Israel. There have been signs of covert intelligence sharing with Israel to monitor Iran's nuclear programs, and Saudi Arabia has strengthened its security ties with the United States and other Western partners. Iran's threat has also prompted Saudi Arabia to seek its own nuclear energy ambitions, an indication that if Iran's nuclear program grows stronger, the regional power dynamics might shift further.

¹⁸ Bard, Mitchell. *The Arab Lobby: The Invisible Alliance That Undermines America's Interests in the Middle East*. Harper, 2010.

In summary, the breakdown of the JCPOA reshaped the Middle East's geopolitical landscape, alongside sparking new alliances aimed at concealing the risks Iran's nuclear power posed.

IV. Transformation of Alliances on the Middle East

4.1 Israel's Position and Alliance Formation with UAE

The 2020 Abraham Accords marked a turning point in Middle East diplomacy, ratifying relations between Israel and the UAE, followed by Bahrain and other Arab states. This newfound relations set a historic precedent in diplomatic relations, as both Israel and the UAE set aside historical divisions to focus on their shared concern over Iran's growing influence. For Israel specifically, the treaty has been particularly impactful, as the agreement prompts cooperation on multiple fronts, as Israel's primary regional adversary is Iran.

By working together, both countries aim to counterbalance Iran's power and establish greater security measures. Israel has historically been isolated from the Middle East, for a number of reasons, particularly the lack of regional recognition and the religious and ideological differences, as a Jewish-majority state in a predominantly Muslim region, as well as their historical alignment with the West. Now, they can benefit from intelligence sharing, expanded military cooperation, and overall a strong ally.

Although as of October 2024, the UAE has not provided direct military assistance to Israel, but has

constantly advocated for a ceasefire¹⁹ for the Israel-Palestine conflict, and has conditioned its support for a two state solution.²⁰

This alliance has strengthened Israel's defense by giving Israel access to Gulf waterways and intelligence networks nearby Iran. For its part, the UAE has improved its defensive capabilities against Iranian threats by leveraging Israeli military expertise and technological advances. Iran has responded by denouncing these partnerships as hostile behavior, viewing them as an element of a broader U.S.-backed anti-Iranian coalition. Iran has deepened its cooperation with states like China and Russia, and strengthened its connections with non-aligned regional entities as a counterbalance and precaution.

¹⁹ UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "UAE Calls for Ceasefire and Protection of Civilians Amid Ongoing Conflict." Last modified June 12, 2024.

<https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2024/6/12/12-6-2024-uae-gaza>.

²⁰ Times of Israel. "UAE: Viable Two-State Solution Plan Needed Before We Commit to Rebuilding Gaza." Accessed November 6, 2024.

https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/uae-viable-two-st-ate-solution-plan-needed-before-we-commit-to-rebuilding-gaza/.



Fig. 2: *Israel's Diplomatic Ties.*
 Source: *The Economist*, 2022.

4.2 Saudi Arabia's Evolving Position

The goal of limiting and eventually reversing Iranian regional influence has united Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Israel. All of these regional players consider that force is the only way of dealing with Iran. Since Tehran would never voluntarily stand down and since doing so would legitimize unwanted Iranian achievements in the region, they view any diplomatic engagement with the country as risky and futile.

It has been a battle between the region's two dominant powers: the kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran.²¹ What was once primarily an ethnic dispute between the Sunni Arab Saudis and the Shiite Persian Iranians has now become a hostile conflict where the two states have participated in opposing sides of the deadliest conflicts in the Middle East. And in most international arenas, Iran's hard power has prevailed.

²¹ Gause, F. Gregory III. "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War." *Brookings Institution*, 2014.

As a result of Iran's participation in the nuclear playground, Saudi Arabia has sought to bolster ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members and with western allies such as the United States. Yet both countries have friends in high places, and the consequences of even higher tensions and direct conflict between the two would be catastrophic for the Middle East. With so many regional powers in play, the best outcome to Saudi-Iranian relations would be two sustainable, forward-looking visions in both countries. While it may be hard to achieve, another ending would be nothing short of fatal.

4.3 Allies and Shifting Stances towards Iran

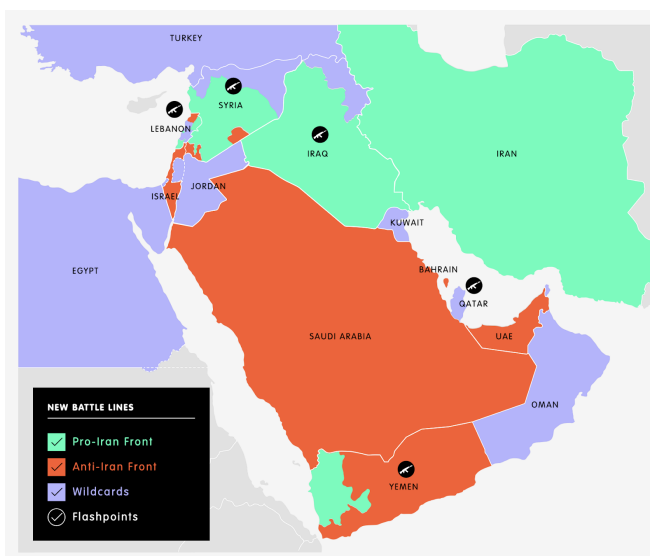


Fig. 3: *Middle East Battle Lines*
 Source: *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2018.

In the evolving geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, several countries have shifted their stance towards Iran, forming coalitions that threaten to drive the region apart. We have already discussed the region's central battle line with Iran– Israel, Saudi Arabia, and UAE– but what

about the other states? Which states have aligned themselves with Iran in this never ending battle for dominance?

Iraq and Syria have established themselves as two key allies in the fight for middle eastern hegemony between Iran and other countries. Syria, a steadfast ally of Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, shares their opposition to the state of Israel and US influence in the region. During the Syrian Civil War, Iran provided military and financial support, and it is safe to say that in the event of escalation (Israel-Iran relations) and an all out war, Syria would provide the same support for their ally. Losing the support of their most strategic ally would change the course of the Middle East conflict.

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein, Iran has gained evident influence on Iraq, particularly among Shia political parties and militia groups. The relationship between both countries is particularly strong, since both states are dominated by Shia Muslims.²² Iraq needs Iran's support in building its economy and in its war against terrorism. And Iran needs Iraq's contribution and support economically, and even as a political mediator when facing the West .

Iran also holds close relationships and alliances with Hezbollah, the political, militant group (many call them a terrorist organization) who are located in Lebanon. Iran

provides weapons and funding to Hezbollah, and Hezbollah acts as an enemy of the state of Israel and a key actor in Middle Eastern politics and Iran's regional stance. Hezbollah holds seats in the Lebanese parliament and is part of political alliances and the government, although it does not have sole control over the Lebanese state. The Palestinian militant group Hamas have also aligned themselves with Iran, primarily through arms supply and economic and financial assistance. Even though Hamas identifies as a Sunni group, it serves as an Iranian ally due to their shared interest in the destruction of Israel.

While Russia does not identify as an ally of Iran in the traditional sense, they have a strategic partnership, specifically in Syria where both countries support the Assad regime. They share interests in countering Western and US influence and maintaining key geopolitical stances in the region due to their own goals, which makes them partners in potential conflict.

The Houthi movement in Yemen, which has been engaged in a civil war against the Saudi-backed Yemeni government, is also an ally of Iran. The alliance challenges Saudi dominance and increases Iran's influence along Saudi Arabia's southern border.

Qatar, even though historically it has maintained balanced diplomatic relations in foreign policy, has recently shifted closer to Iran, partly due to the 2017 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) crisis, during which Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a blockade

²² "From Rivals to Allies: Iran's Evolving Role in Iraq's Geopolitics." 2024. Middle East Council on Global Affairs. https://mecouncil.org/publication_chapters/from-rivals-to-allies-irans-evolving-role-in-iraqs-geopolitics/.

on Qatar. In response to this measure, Qatar deepened its relationship with Iran, coming to include diplomatic engagement and shared cooperation on gas fields.

Sudan and Morocco are two countries which have started to distance themselves from the Iranian landscape. Sudan, which was once a close ally to Iran, shifted its alliance in 2016, aligning with Saudi Arabia and other states, due to economic incentives, and the wish to enter and have a place in the international community. Morocco, on the other hand, cut diplomatic relations with Iran back in 2018, due to reported support on the Polisario Front a separatist movement seeking independence for Western Sahara from Morocco. In 2018 Morocco cut all ties with Iran, stating that Iran had provided military support, through Hezbollah, to Polisario fighters. And although the Polisario support has allowed Iran to build influence in North Africa, they lost Morocco as a potential ally to the battleground.

Turkey is an important player in Middle Eastern relations when discussing Iran due to its strategic location and economic influence, as well as ambitions. They both compete for influence in Syria, Iraq, and Transcaucasus. As Turkey sits at the crossroad of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, giving it a very calculated importance. Both Turkey and Iran aspire to be influential powers in the Middle East, and despite political differences when it comes to supporting certain groups in the area, they have established strong economic ties, especially in trade and energy. Iran supplies natural gas to Turkey, which is crucial

for what Turkey needs in the energy sector. This economic relationship creates a complex agreement between the two countries, where they both balance competition with economic interests. Additionally, Turkey is a member of NATO and maintains close ties with Europe and the US. This allows Turkey to act as a sort of mediator between Iran and the West, creating diplomatic balance.

In summary, these states' actions and alliances are vital for shaping Middle East politics, and these shifts reflect the complex and fluid nature of Middle Eastern dynamics.

V. Theoretical Framework: Realism in International Relations

5.1 Introduction to Realism

Realism is a school of thought in international relations that emphasizes national interest and the pursuit of power. Realism provides a framework to understand the international system, as it states that it is anarchic where states are the primary actors, guiding their actions by self interest and their struggle for power.²³ This theory emphasizes survival as the objective of states, leading to competitive behaviour amongst them. Realism provides tools like balance of power, the principle of self-help, and security dilemma to interpret and analyze state actions.

5.2 Application of Realism to the Transformation of Alliances

²³ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. "Realism in International Relations." Last modified May 24, 2010. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/>.

Israel, through a realist lens, has since its establishment, has sought out to secure its position in a region full of adversaries (also dominated by them) who'd like no more than to erase the state of Israel off of the Middle Eastern map. Iran's nuclear ambitions have served as an existential threat to Israel, and have pushed Israel's diplomatic process to establish relations with other Arab states. Through a realist perspective, Israel has sought to balance their security needs by fostering alliances with Arab states, notably the UAE. Realism explains this as a strategic response to shared threats, reaching out to states by military and intelligence cooperation. We can see this theory pointed out through the Abraham Accords, which are thus a realist strategy that works to counterbalance Iranian influence.

The UAE's alignment with Israel serves as a strategy of pragmatic self-help, reflecting its realist status. As they are faced with nuclear threats from Iran and instability across the region, the UAE uses partnerships and military alliances with advanced states such as Israel, as vital and even critical for enhancing (and keeping) their own security and hegemony. The UAE can also recognize the geopolitical benefits of being an ally of the United States, ensuring continued economic and even military support. The Realist theory explains this scenario as prioritizing self interest and state survival in an unstable region.

Saudi has a play of shifting strategies in a multipolar region, which reflects a realist approach. Saudi Arabia has recently worked within a gradual shift towards normalizing

relations with Israel. Saudi Arabia has long been a proponent of pan-Arab solidarity, but they are increasingly driven by self-interest, especially when it comes to countering Iran's influence. However, these advancements towards a solid partnership with Israel have been crumbling under the Gaza situation, as they have accused Israel of genocide. Israel is still eager and willing to establish formal relations with the Saudi powerhouse, seen as an historic milestone, yet relations are tense due to the ongoing conflict and Riyadh's position towards Palestine. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia's realist strategy involves a practical partnership with Israel to maintain a regional balance of power.

5.3 Nuclear Ambitions and Realist Goals

Iran's nuclear program clearly works as a Realist power strategy, as Iran's ambitions are a pursuit of power and security under an unstable environment. Their nuclear program is not only about military and nuclear capability, but also about regional dominance and bargaining power. Iran achieving nuclear status disrupts the balance of power within the Middle East, challenging their adversaries to scramble for the same developments and strengthen their alliances.

The regional counteractions in response to Iran aligns with a realist lens and the security dilemma factor. Israel builds up its military, collaborates with Arab states, and lobbies for US support, as a tactic to counterbalance the perceived threat, all a realist tactic. When we analyze all previously stated, Realism effectively explains the

transformation of alliances in the Middle East, as it provides a framework to understanding state actions, as it becomes clear that the revision of alliances is not ideological but strategic, rooted in the will of survival and stability.²⁴

VI. Future Scenarios: Nuclear Escalation or Diplomacy?

With potential outcomes varying from escalation to renewed diplomatic efforts, the Iranian nuclear issue has emerged as one of the fundamental challenges in Middle Eastern and international security. Policymakers, analysts, and regional actors are growing more concerned about the possible course of Iran's nuclear program as it continues to grow. The potential outcomes of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons will be examined in this section, along with the effects on regional ties and the future of multilateral initiatives, including the possible revival of the JCPOA. Is it possible to coexist with a nuclear Iran?

6.1 Potential Outcomes if Iran Achieves Nuclear Capability

If Iran were to achieve nuclear weapon capabilities, the repercussions would likely echo throughout the Middle East and beyond. As of 2024, Iran has not yet declared possession of nuclear weapons, but they have significantly advanced their nuclear program, and has enriched uranium to levels of weapons grade and they do possess the technical knowledge to possibly develop a nuclear weapon.

Such an outcome would mean that the power balance in the region would significantly shift. Neighboring countries, such as Saudi Arabia, would consider taking on their own nuclear projects, as they have previously hinted that they would take on their own nuclear capabilities if Iran acquires some of their own, which raises concern about an arms race in the region.²⁵ Israel, who maintains a policy of nuclear ambiguity, would also take part in the arms race that would potentially take place in the Middle East in case of such a situation. And in terms of nuclear power, Israel has the edge. Israel, who is not a signatory of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation on Nuclear Weapons (NPT), is allowed to develop nuclear arsenal outside of international oversight. A regional nuclear threat from Iran would mean Israel racing to increasing their nuclear capabilities.

Additionally, a nuclear armed Iran would mean that they could embolden their policies in the region, as well as strengthen their alliances. Support for proxy groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and militias in Iraq and Syria would increase, signifying peril for their enemies and citizens. The consequence of this would be heightened instability in the region as well as immoral politics. As a result, global powers like the US, Russia, and China would possibly have to intervene or cohead security agreements to improve conditions in the Middle East. This would either allow to contain the threat, or contribute to wider conflicts if mismanaged.

²⁴ Mearsheimer, John J. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2001.

²⁵ Waltz, Kenneth. "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb." *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2012.

6.2 Future of Alliances in the Region

The threat or possibility of a nuclear capable Iran drives existing alliances into strength or breaking down, all depending on the level of perceived threat. Alliances such as the Israel-UAE, formed in the 2020 Abraham Accords, would potentially strengthen and deepen under the Iranian threat. As concerns have been shared in the past over Iran's intentions amongst the Gulf states and Israel, this partnership would empower other states to join the fight against Iranian influence and combine efforts, strategies, intelligence, and military power.

However, we cannot dismiss the potential strain these alliances could face. If Iran were to approach and take a more moderate, diplomatic stance in its policies and in their relationship with the West (highly unlikely), and if Western powers reached a new agreement with Iran, some regional states would seek to balance their ties with Iran, which would compromise their reliance on Israeli security and alliances based on cooperation. Additionally, in this instance, countries with diplomatic ties or economic partnerships with Israel and Iran may have to appease regional voices, and reach for a balanced approach with Iran, which would not favor Israel.

Relationships with significant external powers might shift as well as a result of Iran's nuclear development.

China and Russia,²⁶ given their political and economic connections with Iran, may act as mediators, establishing themselves as regional stabilizing powers.²⁷ Depending on how much China and Russia are perceived to be backing Iran's nuclear development, this influence could drive some Gulf nations towards the United States and Israel.

5.3 Exploring the Future of the JCPOA or New Diplomacy Initiatives

One of the most significant concerns in international diplomacy is still the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also referred to as the Iran Nuclear Deal. The agreement, which was once intended to restrict Iran's nuclear capabilities in return for the lifting of sanctions, suffered substantial setbacks after Iran's continual violations and the U.S. exit in 2018 under President Donald Trump. The possibility of renewing the JCPOA or exploring other diplomatic frameworks in light of ongoing tensions poses major challenges regarding international collaboration, nuclear nonproliferation, and regional stability.

The next Trump administration would completely forsake the JCPOA framework in favor of a "maximum pressure" approach. This strategy would probably entail strengthening economic sanctions and taking a more

²⁶ Sun, Degang, and Yahia H. Zoubir. "China's Participation in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: A Case of Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy?" *Journal of Contemporary China*, 27(110), 2018: 224-243.

²⁷ Leverett, Flynt, and Hillary Mann Leverett. *Going to Tehran: Why the United States Must Come to Terms with the Islamic Republic of Iran*. Picador, 2013.

aggressive stand against Iran's nuclear aspirations. Even though it might impact short-term Iran's economy and reduce its regional influence, Iran could accelerate its nuclear program in the absence of a diplomatic framework, escalating regional tensions and posing a security threat to its neighbors. Furthermore, future multilateral attempts would be considerably tougher by the continuing deterioration of the United States' credibility in international agreements.

New diplomatic efforts might be launched as alternatives to deal with Iran's nuclear ambitions and its increasing involvement in the Middle East if the JCPOA is not renewed. The creation of a regional security agreement encompassing important nations like Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates is one possible strategy. Thorough arms control measures, monetary incentives to promote collaboration, and tactics to lessen proxy wars throughout the area might all be included in such a deal. As an alternative, gradual agreements could focus on specific issues, such as restricting Iran's ballistic missile program or limiting uranium enrichment, offering small but practical steps toward de-escalation.²⁸ Relief from sanctions with a humanitarian focus may also be used as a tactic to set the stage for further negotiations.

Multipolar mediation may see yet another major shift, with superpowers like China and Russia taking on major roles in mediating talks. This strategy might lessen the

strain on the United States while adding new dynamics to the diplomatic process by broadening the sources of pressure on Iran. But doing so would require reevaluating current partnerships to compromise on key issues.

The JCPOA or any new diplomatic initiative survival ultimately rests on striking a balance between idealism and realism when tackling nonproliferation of nuclear weapons and regional stability. Iran's nuclear aspirations must be curbed, but a renewed agreement or alternative framework must also address the larger geopolitical issues raised by its regional influence and proxy operations. A shared commitment to long-term stability and collaboration in the Middle East, persistent multilateral involvement, and reasonable adjustments will all be crucial to success.

VII. Conclusion

Iran's nuclear ambitions have undeniably reshaped the Middle East, driving regional alliances in new and often unprecedented directions. Key findings have indicated that Iran's nuclear ambitions have led historically and traditionally divided states to join forces against a common goal, such as Israel and the UAE. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has shown signs of aligning itself with Western powers and Israel, attempting to counterbalance Iran's influence over the region. The potential for Saudi-Israel relations remains a realistic prospect in diplomatic relations, as it would be considered a historic alliance, spurred by shared interests.

The transformations in alliances also carry significant implications for stability in the Middle East. As more

²⁸ Fitzpatrick, Mark. *Overcoming Pakistan's Nuclear Dangers*. Routledge, 2014

regional actors align against Iran, the Middle East heads towards polarization. This polarization complicates diplomatic efforts and escalates tensions significantly.²⁹ For multilateral institutions like the United Nations or the ICJ (International Court of Justice), it will be increasingly tough to try and balance the interests of these powerful nations with the need for conflict prevention. The United Nations Security Council, particularly, has already challenged to manage issues where their permanent members (such as the US or Russia) may differ on their interests and struggle to take unified action, resulting in taking no action at all, which weakens the influence of the United Nations and global governance institutions.

To conclude, the situation in the Middle East remains a sensitive area, with both opportunities and challenges ahead for regional actors and the international community. While the potential for further nuclear escalation looms ahead, we must search for promising avenues for addressing the Iran nuclear situation.

²⁹ Lustick, Ian. *Trapped in the War on Terror*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.

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