

<https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2025.3-02>

IRSTI 11.25.33

ISSN 2519-2442, KAZAKHSTAN

Research Article

**IRAN AND THE ARAB STATES: CONFLICT AND COOPERATION IN
THE CONTEXT OF REGIONAL INSTABILITY**

Arsylan BERDALIYEV ¹

¹ M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University, 160012, Kazakhstan
arsylan.berdaliyev@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0006-1571-514X

Zhuldyz TUREKULOVA ²

² M. Auezov South Kazakhstan University, 160012, Kazakhstan
turekulova74@mail.ru
ORCID: 0000-0002-2461-2488

Nurlan MUMINOV ³

³ Al Farabi Kazakh National University, 050040, Kazakhstan
n.muminoff@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0001-7824-7044

Received: 12.03.2025

Accepted: 26.05.2025

ABSTRACT

This article examines the evolving political relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Gulf Arab states in the context of regional instability and global multipolarity. Focusing on the period from 2011 to 2025, the study analyzes the structural drivers of conflict and cooperation, including sectarian divisions, geopolitical rivalries, and strategic realignments. Special attention is given to Iran's influence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen through proxy actors, as well as its confrontation with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The research also explores the role of external powers – namely, the United States, China, and Russia – in reshaping the regional order and evaluates the impact of initiatives such as the “Shiite Crescent” and China's Belt and Road. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach combining geopolitical and institutional analysis. The findings reveal a cyclical pattern of confrontation and pragmatic engagement, driven by internal regime dynamics and global power shifts. The article concludes by outlining possible future scenarios for Iran–Arab relations in the Persian Gulf and beyond.

Keywords: Iran, Arab States, Regional security, Geopolitics, Middle East.

For citation: Berdaliyev, A., Turekulova, Zh., & Muminov, N. (2025). Iran and the Arab States: Conflict and Cooperation in the Context of Regional Instability. *Eurasian Research Journal* 7(3), 267-283. <https://doi.org/10.53277/2519-2442-2025.3-02>

BACKGROUND: REGIONAL CONTEXT OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND IRAN–ARAB DYNAMICS

The Middle East has long been recognized as one of the world's most strategically significant yet politically volatile regions. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, it is home to vast hydrocarbon reserves, vital maritime trade routes, and a complex mosaic of cultures, religions, and ethnic identities. Historically, the region has been shaped by colonial legacies, authoritarian governance, and the enduring struggle for control over resources and territory. These factors have contributed to chronic instability and persistent conflict.

At the heart of this geopolitical landscape lies the rivalry between major regional powers vying for influence in the post–Ottoman and post–colonial order. One of the most defining fault lines has been the tension between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Arab states of the Gulf, particularly the Sunni monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. Rooted in a combination of ideological, religious, and strategic differences, this rivalry has transcended national borders and expanded into broader regional conflicts, from Lebanon and Syria to Iraq and Yemen.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 marked a turning point in regional politics, as Iran began to export its revolutionary Shiite ideology across the Middle East, challenging the established Sunni dominance represented by the Gulf monarchies. Over the decades, Iran has employed a multifaceted strategy involving ideological outreach, proxy networks, military support, and economic diplomacy to extend its influence. In response, Arab states have pursued counterbalancing measures, often aligning themselves with Western powers or forming new intra-regional coalitions.

The Arab Spring, beginning in 2011, further disrupted the fragile regional equilibrium. As regimes fell and societies fragmented, Iran and the Gulf states intensified their competition for influence in states such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Simultaneously, global power shifts – including the perceived retrenchment of the United States and the rise of China and Russia – introduced new dimensions to the regional order, complicating traditional alliances and security frameworks.

This backdrop of historical contestation and contemporary realignment provides the basis for understanding the current phase of Iran–Arab relations. Their interactions are no longer confined to bilateral diplomacy or military standoffs. However, they are embedded in wider networks of ideological, economic, and strategic rivalries that shape the future of the entire Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary international relations are undergoing accelerated transformation, with traditional institutions facing declining effectiveness in managing interstate affairs. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the Middle East, where regional instability is exacerbated by domestic conflicts, sectarian fragmentation, and the competing interests of global powers. Among the most influential issues contributing to regional insecurity are the Palestinian question, the prolonged crises in Syria and Yemen, and the evolving balance of power among key state actors, including Iran, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Israel, and international stakeholders such as the United States, China, and Russia (Esfandiary, 2021; Ulrichsen, 2020).

A crucial component of Middle Eastern geopolitics is the complex relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Arab states, particularly the monarchies of the Persian Gulf. These relationships are deeply rooted in ideological, religious, geopolitical, and strategic rivalries. Iran, as a Shiite theocracy, frequently finds itself at odds with the Sunni Arab monarchies, particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The rivalry manifests in Iran's support for various political and military actors such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite militias in Iraq (Calvo, 2023). Through its involvement in regional conflicts and the strategic use of proxy forces, Iran has sought to expand its influence, thereby contributing to both regional destabilization and the creation of alternative security structures (Cordesman & Toukan, 2022). Iran actively shapes the emerging regional order in the Middle East by resisting Western dominance and striving for the establishment of a multipolar world in which it envisions itself playing a central role (Ehteshami et al., 2024).

The study focuses specifically on the period between the Arab Spring of 2011 and 2025, a time marked by dramatic transformations across the region. Within this timeframe, the research analyzes Iran's bilateral and multilateral interactions with members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. These interactions are examined in light of shifting alliances, regional realignments, and the broader process of global power diffusion. The research places special emphasis on Iran's foreign policy reorientation toward China and Russia, particularly in the context of U.S.-imposed sanctions and growing interest in multipolar frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative (Sazmand & Ramezani, 2021). China is actively expanding economic cooperation with both the Arab states of the Persian Gulf and Iran, thereby influencing the geopolitical landscape of the region. While doing so, China avoids involvement in military affairs, instead focusing on energy and infrastructure projects (Fulton, 2022).

The scope of this study is delimited to three key dimensions:

1. Iran's foreign policy reorientation toward China and Russia in response to U.S. sanctions and multipolar frameworks (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative).
2. The GCC states' responses to Iran's actions, emphasizing Saudi Arabia and the UAE as primary case studies.
3. The mediating role of external powers (the U.S., China, and Russia) in shaping regional security dynamics.

As the United States gradually retracts from active regional engagement, a strategic vacuum is emerging, offering both challenges and opportunities for regional actors to reshape alliances. Simultaneously, Iran's ideological positioning – grounded in the principles of the Islamic Revolution – continues to influence its efforts to build partnerships across Shiite communities in the Arab world. The region is thus caught between persistent confrontation and episodes of pragmatic cooperation.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the cyclical nature of Iran-Arab relations – a dynamic in which confrontation periodically gives way to cooperation, depending on changes in domestic regimes, global alliances, and strategic calculations. By analyzing the structural drivers

of these relationships, the research aims to clarify whether the current trajectory is leading toward greater integration or continued fragmentation.

This article employs an interdisciplinary qualitative methodology that combines content analysis of strategic policy documents, official statements, academic publications, and expert assessments. The research incorporates a comparative geopolitical approach and institutional analysis to examine the dynamics of Iranian-Arab relations within the broader framework of regional instability. Special attention is given to the role of external powers – such as the United States, Russia, and China – insofar as their strategic interests and interventions influence Iran’s positioning and its bilateral and multilateral engagements with Arab states.

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What are the main geopolitical and sectarian drivers behind Iran’s conflict with Gulf Arab states?
2. To what extent has Iran managed to cooperate with Arab countries despite ideological and religious rivalry?
3. How do external powers shape the dynamics of Iran–Arab relations in the Persian Gulf?

The study conceptualizes Iran’s regional strategy within the framework of growing multipolarity by examining its interactions with Arab states and the role of external powers. It identifies key geopolitical and ideological tensions that drive either cooperation or conflict and offers insights into potential scenarios for regional stabilization or escalation.

RESEARCH METHODS: INSTITUTIONAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES ON IRAN–ARAB RELATIONS

The present study employs an interdisciplinary approach, integrating methodologies from political analysis, international relations, and geopolitics. The primary methodological approach entails a content analysis of official documents, academic literature, expert opinions, and open-source data. The comparative analysis examines the strategies employed by major actors in world politics (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran, China, and the United States) in the context of their influence on the security of the Persian Gulf. The comparison is carried out on key parameters, including military presence, diplomatic activity, economic cooperation, and influence on regional conflicts.

The analysis of official documents encompasses the study of strategic doctrines, international agreements, statements by state leaders, and publications of think tanks. Institutional analysis is a methodological framework employed to assess the role of organizations such as the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC), the United Nations (UN), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The employment of the historical-comparative method facilitates the examination of Iran’s evolving relations with Arab nations, thereby enabling the identification of both persistent trends and mutable factors that influence regional security.

THE “EXPANDED MIDDLE EAST” AS A NEW GEOSTRATEGIC PARADIGM

The territorial boundaries of the Middle East remain a subject of ongoing debate and geopolitical concern. Conventionally, the region encompasses North African countries, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Türkiye, and the Arab states. However, in the 21st century, there has been a tendency to expand the geopolitical concept of the “Greater Middle East” proposed by the United States. This initiative involves incorporating countries surrounding the Black and Caspian Seas, as well as Central Asia, into the region, thereby altering the balance of power within the geopolitical landscape.

One of the most radical perspectives on the future of the region is the concept proposed by Ralph Peters in his essay “Bloody Borders,” published in the *Armed Forces Journal*. In this work, Peters (2006) proposes a revision of the geographical boundaries of the Middle East. He argues that the artificial borders that were established as a result of 20th-century colonial policies have contributed to the current state of instability in the region. The hypothesis posits the potential for a reconfiguration of the region’s borders, encompassing the following alterations:

1. The division of Iraq into Sunni and Shiite states;
2. The formation of an “Islamic Holy State” within the territory of Saudi Arabia;
3. The expansion of Iranian influence eastward, resulting in the loss of Afghan territory in favor of Azerbaijan and Baluchistan.

Even though Peters’s proposed changes were not fully implemented, elements of his theory were reflected in the events that followed the 2011 Arab Spring and the conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Iraq. The political transformations in the region were accompanied by increasing sectarian tensions, the growing influence of non-traditional actors (such as armed groups and transnational terrorist organizations), and active intervention by external powers.

Among the most significant changes taking place in the region are:

1. The fragmentation of conventional states. The ongoing military conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya have contributed to the erosion of state institutions, thereby leading to the strengthening of ethno-confessional groups.
2. The expansion of Iranian influence is another notable development. The deployment of proxies, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and Shiite groups in Iraq, has enabled Iran to augment its strategic presence in the region.
3. The changing role of external actors is another salient development. While the United States occupied a dominant position in Middle Eastern politics in the early 2000s, by the 2020s, the influence of Russia and China had increased, especially in the sphere of military-technical cooperation and economic investment. In the context of emerging multipolarity, the United States is losing its traditional influence in the region, while China and Russia are actively expanding their presence – China through economic initiatives and Russia through military cooperation and support for its allies (Kamrava, 2021).

A seminal document that exerted significant influence on the perception of Israel's geopolitical strategy is the "Yinon Plan." In 1982, the Israeli analyst Oded Yinon published an article entitled "Israel's Strategy in the 1980s" in the journal *Kivunim*, in which he explored the possibilities of strengthening Israel's regional dominance. The crux of this argument was that, in order to ensure its own security and strategic superiority, Israel needed to promote the fragmentation of Arab states into smaller, weaker entities (Sayar, 2019). This strategic vision included the dissolution of Iraq into three distinct states (Sunni, Shiite, and Kurdish), the destabilization of Syria through the potential fragmentation of the nation into several parts, the weakening of Iran by supporting ethnic and regional separatists, and the exertion of influence on Egypt, Libya, Somalia, and Pakistan to create controlled regimes or independent entities subject to external influence.

Despite the ongoing discourse surrounding the Yinon Plan, which remains the subject of debate and is regarded as a hypothetical scenario, subsequent events in the region have substantiated the presence of structural changes that align with the forecasts delineated in the document. The intervention of external actors, including the United States, the European Union, Russia, and China, in the political processes of the Middle East has emerged as a primary cause of destabilization.

A comprehensive review of contemporary publications, encompassing Western, Asian, post-Soviet, and domestic studies, facilitates the identification of two pivotal domains that determine regional security. Among the internal factors, we can note demographic growth and the lack of effective mechanisms for socio-economic integration, as well as gaps in the educational system that contribute to the radicalization of young people. Additionally, there are high unemployment rates and economic inequality, corruption, and weak state institutions. An additional destabilizing factor is environmental problems, including a shortage of water resources, as well as the prevalence of a raw materials economy dependent on oil and gas exports.

The external factors under consideration are associated with the competition among geopolitical actors. The competition for control over energy resources and transportation routes, including oil and gas pipelines and maritime routes, has a substantial influence on the stability of the region. The intervention of global and regional powers, including the United States, Russia, China, Türkiye, and Iran, in conflicts and political processes has also been a contributing factor to the escalation of tensions. A notable example of this dynamic is the ongoing geopolitical confrontation between the United States and Iran, which plays a pivotal role in the strategic landscape of the Persian Gulf. Furthermore, hybrid strategies, such as support for proxy groups and information warfare, are being employed with increasing frequency.

The geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East are in a state of constant flux, influenced by both internal transformations and global processes. In 2025, the role of non-Arab states in the region has increased significantly, exerting a substantial influence on the balance of power. A primary factor contributing to this shift is the escalating rivalry between Iran, Türkiye, and Israel. The erosion of Iran's standing, precipitated by military confrontations with Israel, the forfeiture of allies, and domestic crises, has engendered a power vacuum that other regional actors are endeavoring to fill. Türkiye, relying on its military and economic ca-

pabilities, is attempting to gain a foothold in the strategically significant regions of Syria and Lebanon. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is fortifying its influence by leveraging financial resources and forging new alliances.

In response to Iran's regional expansion, Saudi Arabia is shaping its foreign policy within a complex context of relations with the United States, Iran, and domestic challenges. It seeks to balance its ties with Washington while simultaneously preventing the further growth of Iranian influence in the region (Gause, 2021).

In a similar vein, Israel persists in implementing a strategy aimed at achieving regional dominance. According to certain analysts, Israel's policy is aimed at preventing the strengthening of hostile states and organizations, as well as the formation of new alliances, including coordination with a number of Arab countries. Concurrently, Tel Aviv endorses initiatives designed to undermine the Palestinian national movement, thereby contributing to the intensification of the ongoing conflict. The geopolitical landscape is further complicated by the involvement of global actors such as the United States, Russia, and China. The return of Donald Trump to the US presidency could potentially lead to a reevaluation of American policy in the region, which may include a more stringent approach toward Iran and an escalation in support for Israel. Concurrently, the prospects for US-Russian dialogue remain uncertain, a circumstance that may affect the degree of Moscow's involvement in Middle Eastern processes.

According to Dalia Dassa Kaye (2025), a senior fellow at the University of California, the non-Arab states that will have the greatest impact on changing the geopolitical dynamics in the region in 2025 are Iran, Türkiye, and Israel. The primary objectives of China, Russia, and Iran are to establish a new world order that will dominate regional developments by 2025. The basis for expanded cooperation between Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran was to be trilateral interactions within the SCO or BRICS. In March 2024, the joint China-Iran-Russia exercise, dubbed "Maritime Security Belt 2024," was conducted in the Gulf of Oman in the Arabian Sea. The Iranian side expressed optimism regarding the potential for an alliance among China, Russia, and Iran.

The alliance between Iran, Russia, and China is regarded as one of the most substantial threats to the global influence of the United States. According to Iranian Ambassador to Moscow Kazem Jalali, this alliance has the potential to establish a new multipolar, equitable, and democratic global order (RIA Novosti, 2025). Nonetheless, recent events in Syria, including the fall of Bashar al-Assad, have demonstrated that Moscow's position in the Middle East has been significantly weakened. This is primarily attributable to Russia's strategic prioritization of its military and political resources toward the Ukrainian conflict, a decision that has significantly constrained its regional capabilities.

The question of whether Moscow will be able to maintain a strategic alliance with Iran as resolutely in the future is a salient one, especially in the context of a possible change in the balance of power between the United States and Russia. Moreover, by 2025, the dissolution of the Iranian proxy forces system, which has been established over the course of decades, will become evident. If, by 2023, Tehran had been actively determining the political course in Yemen, the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, thereby maintaining its status as a key regional player, it is now experiencing a weakening of its influence.

Israel and the Trump administration persist in their assertive approach toward Iran, a policy that portends further erosion of Iran's position. Despite these challenges, Iranian proxy groups in Yemen and Iraq maintain a degree of operational effectiveness, though their long-term viability is being rigorously assessed. The long-term viability of the Iranian–Russian–Chinese alliance is contingent upon the interplay between global and regional actors, as well as domestic socio-economic and political processes within the member nations.

RELATIONS BETWEEN IRAN AND ARAB COUNTRIES AS AN IMPORTANT FACTOR OF REGIONAL SECURITY

The geographic location of each power exerts a decisive influence on its foreign policy. In the context of an unstable international order, territorial and geopolitical claims of states inevitably give rise to conflicts, as the strategic interests and national priorities of various actors often prove incompatible. The historical immutability of geographic characteristics engenders stability in the territorial ambitions of states over centuries, thereby determining the long-term vectors of their foreign policy strategy.

Iran implements its foreign policy in four key geostrategic regions: the Fertile Crescent, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Southern Coastal Region. This regional multi-vector nature gives rise to both significant security challenges and unique economic opportunities for Tehran (Aljarwan, 2020). The Middle East remains the primary focus of Iran's foreign policy, shaping the nature of its relations with Arab states. Several key factors influence the nature of these relations, including Iran's role in the Middle East following the transformation processes in Syria and Lebanon, the strategic importance of the Strait of Hormuz as a pivotal element of Iranian–Arab relations, and the export of the Iranian model of the Islamic Revolution coupled with the utilization of the Shiite factor in Tehran's foreign policy.

SHIITE INFLUENCE IN IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY AND THE EXPORT OF THE IRANIAN ISLAMIC REVOLUTION MODEL

In its foreign policy strategy, Iran positions itself as a key regional hub and pillar of the Islamic world, seeking to reform the international system in the spirit of multipolarity. A pivotal component of this strategy is the Umm al-Qura doctrine, which was developed in the 1980s by Mohammad Javad Larijani. This doctrine posits that Iran assumes an extraterritorial role within the Islamic world, under the premise that the Muslim ummah constitutes a unified community bound by the concept of leadership. In this context, Iran, as the first state to implement the Islamic model of governance, perceives itself as the natural leader of the Muslim world, whose influence extends beyond its national borders.

The Islamic Republic of Iran's official ideology is predicated on the notion of "exporting the Islamic revolution." This doctrine is formally established in the Constitution of Iran, particularly in Article 3, which stipulates that one of the primary objectives of the state is to pursue foreign policy in accordance with Islamic principles, foster fraternal relations with Muslim nations, and provide support to oppressed communities globally. The implementation of this policy is significantly influenced by the Shiite factor. The Islamic Republic seeks to consolidate Shiite communities within Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates, thereby positioning itself as the

preeminent political center for Shiites. This strategy is not solely intended to augment Tehran’s regional influence; it is also aimed at establishing a vast network of allies capable of supporting its geopolitical interests. The accompanying table illustrates the percentage of the Shiite population in Arab countries, thereby demonstrating the extent of this influence.

Table 1
Share of Shiites in Arab countries

№	Country share	%
1	Iraq	67,5%
2	Lebanon	50%
3	Yemen	32,5%
4	Kuwait	22,5%
5	Syria	17,5%
6	Saudi Arabia	12,5%
7	Qatar	10,5%
8	Bahrain	70%

Source: Statista, 2023

The aforementioned evidence suggests the potential for a Shiite alternative to politically confront other Middle Eastern power structures. However, Shiism is also viewed as a potential threat by surrounding Arab states. According to several commentators, Tehran’s worldview exerts a considerable political influence on the Middle East. This potential has increased in the context of regime change in the Arab world and the escalation of national and religious conflicts, which in some countries has been accompanied by the consolidation of Shiite communities.

The Shiite factor constitutes a substantial component of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). A notable illustration of this influence is the concept of the “Shiite Crescent,” which aims to foster collaboration among nations extending from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. This strategy is designed to establish a sphere of influence and security for Iran, thereby ensuring its presence in proximity to Israel, Türkiye, and Saudi Arabia (Cheremnykh, 2017).

The term “Shia Crescent” refers to the regional spread of Shiism in the Middle East, encompassing Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and several Gulf States. The concept was introduced into the political lexicon by King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2004, and it has been interpreted in different ways. For instance, French political scientist Vincent Doix contends that Iran is forging alliances not necessarily in support of Shiism, but rather in accordance with its national interests. Doix (2017) further emphasizes that a key element of Tehran’s expansionist policy has become the bet on Arab Shia communities, which is in line with the ideological principles of the Islamic Revolution.

THE PROBLEM OF THE STRAIT OF HORMUZ IN IRANIAN-ARAB RELATIONS

Iran's considerable military and political dominance in the Strait of Hormuz, a pivotal international shipping route for the transportation of crude oil, significantly impacts its relations with Arab and oil-exporting countries. Ensuring the safety of navigation in this narrow passage between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean is a pivotal factor for the global oil and gas industry. Historically, the movement of naval vessels through the Strait of Hormuz has been conducted with the active involvement of the Iranian Navy, which is predominantly comprised of the regular Navy and the fleet of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Iranian navy's operations in the Strait of Hormuz are conducted in collaboration with the Sultanate of Oman through the Oman semi-enclave of Musandam. It is imperative to note that all naval vessels, including those from the United States Navy, are required to navigate through Iranian territorial waters to transit the Strait of Hormuz. It is noteworthy that the majority of the Persian Gulf's entry points are situated within Iranian territorial waters, while the majority of its exits are located in the waters of Oman. According to the U.S. Department of Energy (EIA), the average daily oil flow in 2022 did not exceed 21 million barrels. This volume represents approximately 21% of the global crude oil trade (EIA, 2023). In 2023, the average transportation volume of at least 20,9 million barrels per day (b/d), constituting approximately 20% of the global value, awaits non-products. It is noteworthy that approximately 90% of oil exports from the Persian Gulf are transported via oil tankers along this particular route.

The Strait of Hormuz is a strategic waterway that Iran periodically threatens to close in response to Western sanctions. Different powers use this fact. A notable example is an attack by Iraqi forces during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) on an oil terminal on Kharg Island, situated northwest of the strait. It was intended to provoke Iran into a reaction that could potentially lead to U.S. interference in the conflict. While Iran ultimately did not attempt to block the strait, the hostilities gave rise to the so-called “Tanker War”, during which 451 vessels were targeted. As a result, tanker insurance costs surged, contributing to a rise in global oil prices (Mohod et al., 2020).

When sanctions were imposed on Iran in 2011, the Islamic Republic threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz. However, the country eventually abandoned this intention. Experts have expressed skepticism about the likelihood of the country ever completely closing the strait, as doing so would hinder Iran's ability to export its own oil. On February 18, 2025, at the eighth conference on the history of Iran's foreign relations entitled “Iran's Foreign Policy and the Persian Gulf in History,” Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi stated, “The Islamic Republic of Iran, which has the longest borders with the Persian Gulf and controls the Strait of Hormuz, plays an indispensable role in maintaining stability and security of this water area and adjacent these areas.” It is therefore imperative to acknowledge the profound strategic significance of the Persian Gulf for both Iran and the broader region. In light of the destructive potential posed by the presence and competition of eastern and western foreign powers, the Islamic Republic of Iran has adopted a nuanced strategy aimed at ensuring maximum local security. Notwithstanding the prevailing pressures, the nation has endeavored to maintain sustainable stability, security, and freedom of navigation in

the Persian Gulf within the framework of its security doctrine (Iranian Foreign Ministry, 2025).

The Arab states of the Persian Gulf have taken proactive steps to lessen their dependence on the Strait of Hormuz. As part of this strategy, the United Arab Emirates supported the development of the Habshan-Fujairah pipeline, also referred to as the Abu Dhabi pipeline, which was designed to bypass the shipping routes of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz. The project was initiated in 2006, with the contract finalized in 2007 and construction beginning in 2008. This pipeline establishes a direct link between Abu Dhabi and the port of Fujairah, located on the shores of the Gulf of Oman in the Arabian Sea. Israel and Türkiye have likewise demonstrated significant interest in this strategic initiative. The latter has been in discussions with Qatar about establishing an oil terminal in Türkiye to facilitate the transfer of oil supplies from Iraq. Furthermore, the Turkish government is actively working to convince Baghdad to connect its southern oil fields to the existing transit pipeline network running through Türkiye, mirroring the approach already applied to Iraq's northern oil fields.

A considerable number of analysts have posited that, given Qatar's exclusive reliance on the Strait of Hormuz for its export routes, the country's vehement advocacy for the dissolution of the Assad regime in Syria could potentially precipitate the construction of a gas pipeline traversing Syria, extending from Qatar to Saudi Arabia. The prospect of constructing the Qatar-Türkiye gas pipeline has been a subject of discussion since 2009, with initial plans proposing its passage through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Syria. However, the implementation of this project has been postponed, as stated by Ankara, due to the former Syrian authorities' opposition. However, with the change in Syrian leadership, the project has once again become a topic of interest. Concurrently, Qatar's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bin Mohammed al-Ansari refuted claims regarding the resumption of the pipeline project, characterizing them as mere speculation.

While Iran's policies regarding the Strait of Hormuz, including its intention to mine the strait, are a response to the economic and political pressure exerted by the United States, such actions could ultimately have negative consequences for Iran itself. According to the principles of international law, the mining of the strait would be regarded as an act of aggression, potentially providing the United States and its regional allies with a legal and strategic justification to initiate a military operation against Iran.

IRAN'S POSITION IN THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN SYRIA AND LEBANON

Iran's Middle Eastern policy is also rife with regional security issues, which also impact Iran's national security. The fundamental factors can be delineated as such:

The first of these is the ongoing separatist movement among the Kurdish people. The establishment of a so-called Kurdish state within the broader context of the "Greater Middle East" policy espoused by the United States has emerged as a contentious issue, endangering the territorial integrity of Iran. It is noteworthy that Saudi Arabia, along with other Arabian monarchies, shares concerns regarding this issue, perceiving the dissolution of Iranian territory as a potential weakening of Tehran's position. The North Western Region of Iran, which en-

compasses four provinces: The northwestern region of Iran, encompassing the provinces of Kermanshah, Ilam, West Azerbaijan, and the province administered from Sanandaj, collectively hosting a Kurdish population of 6 to 7 million individuals, constituting 7-9% of the nation's total population.

The Palestinian issue and Iran's relationship with Israel are also salient factors. The recent exchange of missile strikes in April 2024 between Israel and Iran underscores the potential for escalation of conflict in the Middle East and the possibility of World War III. According to Sazhin, a senior researcher at the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Iran lacks the military capabilities to compete with Israel and the United States, and consequently, it is unable to engage in a large-scale war with these nations. Consequently, Iran's foreign policy is centered on the utilization of Shiite militias to engage in a hybrid warfare strategy. This strategy has been instrumental in consolidating Iran's hegemonic position in the Middle East since the advent of the 21st century, with a primary focus on confronting Israel (Sazhin, 2021).

The historical and contemporary rivalry between Iran and Türkiye in the Middle East region. Türkiye and Iran have been geographically proximate and interacted with one another in the Middle East for several centuries, thereby determining the balance of power in the region. The nature of Turkish-Iranian relations is intricate, involving a dynamic interplay of elements that compete for regional dominance, as well as a convergence of interests in the economic and security domains. In this context, Ankara and Tehran must continually endeavor to identify compromises and establish a system of mutual checks and balances. A significant aspect of this dynamic is the religious and ideological competition between the two nations. While Iran has positioned itself as the leader of the Shiite world, Türkiye has emerged as the leading figure among Sunni nations on the global stage. Erdoğan's policy is aimed at acquiring Türkiye's leading role in ensuring regional security in the regions of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, and the Middle East. Türkiye has established military bases in the Middle East. Turkish military bases have been established in Qatar, Libya, and Turkish troops have been deployed in Iraq at the request of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi since 2014. While Türkiye previously prioritized its relations with the Western world, recent years have witnessed the emergence of "new identities" in Türkiye's foreign policy, a development that Sheharyar Khan (2015) has observed.

Iran's military and political strategy poses a significant threat to the regional security of the Middle East. The Islamic Republic of Iran continues to produce and develop weapons and equipment, including ground weapons, infantry weapons, heavy artillery missiles, and drones. According to Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, Iran has increased its arms exports four to fivefold over the past two years, and these exports are expected to rise even further in the future, considering the innovations and new types of weapons Iran is developing and presenting (Iran International, 2024). With the largest missile arsenal in the Middle East after Israel, Iran's missile force is capable of countering threats with constant defensive deterrence, in addition to other types of torpedoes and naval missiles. In 2022, U.S. Central Command General Kenneth McKenzie declared that Iran possessed "more than 3,000" ballistic missiles. This figure does not include the country's expanding ground-attack cruise missile forces. (U.S. National Air and Space Intelligence Center, 2020).

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria has dealt a significant blow to Iran's regional influence. This development has precipitated substantial losses for the Iranian-sponsored axis of resistance, thereby diminishing its primary instruments for fortifying its influence. This shift in the regional dynamics presents a significant opportunity for Israel to address any potential threats to its security from Syria and Iran. Israel is strategically leveraging the ongoing collapse of the Syrian regime, as well as the recent strikes on the Lebanese Hezbollah and Hamas movements, to advance its geopolitical agenda in the region. The Syrian regime's role as a fundamental pillar of Iranian influence in the region and its status as a necessary destination for Iranian military supplies to Hezbollah are pivotal factors in this strategic shift.

The losses incurred by the Shiite crescent countries resulted in a diminution of the influence exercised by pro-Iranian factions within the region, concomitant with a weakening of the power and influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Syria. This shift has been accompanied by the elimination of senior and field commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the destruction of strategic facilities. The disintegration of the regime, the dissolution of the military, and the exodus of Assad have profoundly altered Iran's pivotal leverage points in its interactions with the regional and international systems within the region. The Wall Street Journal further notes that the fall of the Assad regime in Syria constituted a strategic setback for Iran, compelling the country to reconsider its defense strategy and augment its nuclear program in the face of mounting threats from Israel and the resumption of Donald Trump's tenure in the United States (Rasmussen, 2024). However, following the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran significantly recalibrated its strategy by strengthening diplomatic ties with Russia and China, while also consolidating its presence in Syria and Iraq to establish a buffer zone against Western influence (Juneau, 2023).

The role of Iran in the formation and evolution of Hezbollah has been multifaceted, encompassing historical, ideological, and geopolitical dimensions. The intersection of Lebanon's internal dynamics and Iran's revolutionary aspirations has contributed to the emergence of Hezbollah as a significant political and military entity. The consequences of the Israeli operation have been significant, as evidenced by the death of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Shiite Hezbollah movement. Given that Hezbollah is Iran's primary instrument for advancing its interests in the region, Tehran is also confronted with a dilemma in its Middle Eastern strategy. Nevertheless, as recent events demonstrate, Iran has adopted a pragmatic approach. It is evident that Iran is not inclined to engage in armed conflict within its borders. In a telephone interview with the Times, former Iranian Vice President Mohammad Ali Abtahi articulated that Nasrallah's killing was "an incredibly heavy blow," and, in practical terms, there is no obvious path to recovery from this loss. He further emphasized that engaging in armed conflict was not a viable option (Fassihi, 2024). In a related development, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian stated that Tehran does not seek war with Israel but is prepared to respond adequately to Israeli attacks on Iranian military facilities. This statement underscores Iran's profound concern that a large-scale war with Israel could potentially lead to the dissolution of the Iranian state.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the evolving nature of Iran's relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf within the broader context of regional instability and shifting global dynamics. Through the lens of geopolitical rivalry, sectarian identities, and external interference, the analysis confirms that Iran–Arab relations are inherently cyclical, marked by alternating phases of confrontation and cautious engagement.

The findings suggest that geopolitical and sectarian drivers remain at the core of tensions between Iran and the Gulf monarchies. Iran's regional strategy – anchored in the export of its revolutionary ideology, reliance on proxy forces, and assertive military posture – has often clashed with the interests of Sunni Arab states seeking to preserve the existing balance of power. At the same time, shared concerns such as maritime security, economic interdependence, and shifting alliances with global powers have periodically opened channels for pragmatic cooperation.

In answering the research questions, the study identifies three key trends. First, the ideological rivalry between Shiite Iran and Sunni Arab regimes continues to shape foreign policy choices and alliance-building across the region. Second, despite profound religious and strategic divides, both sides have demonstrated an ability to engage in temporary détente, especially in response to external threats or economic pressures. Third, external actors – most notably the United States, China, and Russia – continue to play a decisive role in either enabling or constraining regional realignments. China's economic diplomacy, Russia's military coordination, and the declining engagement of the United States are all recalibrating regional power structures.

The article also demonstrates that Iran's influence, while substantial, is not immutable. The fall of allied regimes, the loss of proxy capabilities, and the rise of competing regional actors such as Türkiye and Israel have challenged Tehran's long-standing position. Simultaneously, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have shown increasing strategic autonomy, engaging in diversified diplomacy that reflects a more multipolar regional order.

In conclusion, Iran–Arab relations cannot be fully understood in isolation from the wider geopolitical environment. They are embedded in overlapping ideological, strategic, and economic layers that collectively determine the region's trajectory. As global multipolarity deepens and new alignments emerge, the future of Iran–Arab relations will depend on their ability to transition from zero-sum rivalries to frameworks of managed competition and structured dialogue. Continued scholarly attention will be essential to monitor these developments and assess their implications for regional and international security.

Ethical Commission Approval

This study did not require approval from an ethics committee as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data used in this research were obtained from publicly available sources.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

REFERENCES

- Aljarwan, M. K. J. A. (2020). *The strategy of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy in the Middle East following the "Arab Spring"* [Master's thesis, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia].
- Calvo, F. C. (2023). *Understanding the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry: The evolution of bilateral relations, regional security implications and US influence (1960–2018)* [Unpublished master's thesis, University of Padua]. <https://thesis.unipd.it/handle/20.500.12608/77447>
- Cheremnykh, I. (2017). *Iran and Arab countries: Cooperation or confrontation?* Russian International Affairs Council. https://russiancouncil.ru/blogs/NSO_MGIMO/iran-i-arabskie-strany-sotrudnichestvo-ili-protivo-stoyanie/
- Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. (n.d.). *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Full text*. Guardian Council of the Constitution. <https://www.shora-gc.ir/en/news/87/constitution-of-the-islamic-republic-of-iran-full-text>
- Cordesman, A. H., & Toukan, A. (2022). *Iran and the Gulf military balance*. Center for Strategic and International Studies. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iran-and-gulf-military-balance>
- Doix, V. (2017). *Le facteur chiite dans la politique étrangère de l'Iran*. La revue géopolitique. <https://www.diploweb.com/Le-facteur-chiite-dans-la-politique-etrangere-de-l-Iran.html>
- Ehteshami, A., & Hinnebusch, R. (2024). The Arab world and Iran: Power, politics and the dynamics of regional order. *Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 60(2), 189–211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2024.2337713>
- Esfandiary, D. (2021). *Changing security dynamics in the Persian Gulf: The case of the United Arab Emirates* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, King's College London].
- Fassihi, F. (2024). Iran's leaders are vulnerable, divided and at a crossroads on responding to Israel. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/29/world/middleeast/iran-hezbollah-israel-nasrallah.html>
- Fulton, J. (2022). China's strategic partnership diplomacy in the Gulf: Hedging and influence. *International Affairs*, 98(1), 245–262. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iab252>
- Gause, F. G., III. (2021). The foreign policy of Saudi Arabia: Balancing between the U.S., Iran, and regional challenges. *Middle East Policy*, 28(1), 23–37. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mepo.12502>
- Iran International Newsroom. (2024). Iran Defense Minister boasts of increasing arms exports. *Iran International*. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403135373>
- Iranian Foreign Ministry. (2025). The policy of excluding Iran from regional agreements has failed. *ISNA*. <https://en.isna.ir/news/1403113022163/Iran-s-FM-The-policy-of-excluding-Iran-from-regional-arrangements>

- Juneau, T. (2023). Iran's strategic posture in the Middle East after the JCPOA collapse. *The Washington Quarterly*, 46(3), 112–127. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2023.2235416>
- Kamrava, M. (2021). Geopolitics of the Persian Gulf in the age of multipolarity. *Global Affairs*, 7(3), 259–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2021.1916350>
- Kaye, D. D. (2025). For the Middle East, 2025 will be about the shifting balance of power. *World Politics Review*. <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/middle-east-2025-preview/>
- Mohod, N., & Kashikar, M. (2020). Choke points in the Indian Ocean: Issues and perspectives. *Scholarly Research Journal for Interdisciplinary Studies*, 7(59).
- Peters, R. (2006). Blood borders: How a better Middle East would look. *Armed Forces Journal*. <http://armedforcesjournal.com/blood-borders/>
- Rasmussen, S. E. (2024). Iran suffers blow of 'historic proportions' with Assad's fall. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/syria-iran-assad-axis-of-resistance-6289667a>
- RIA Novosti. (2025). The Iranian ambassador called the alliance with Russia and China a serious challenge for the United States. *RIA Novosti*. <https://ria.ru/20250115/posol-1993882101.html>
- Sayar, Y. (2019). Yinon Planı'ndan günümüze Ortadoğu. *The Journal of Academic Social Science*, 7(95), 533–550. <https://doi.org/10.16992/ASOS.15189>
- Sazhin, V. (2021). Iran vs Israel (modern context). *International Life*. <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/29380>
- Sazmand, B., & Ramezani, A. (2021). The importance and challenges of the Persian Gulf for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). *Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies*, 4(1), 75–108.
- Sheharyar, K. (2015). The transformation of Turkish foreign policy towards the Middle East. *Policy Perspectives*, 12(1), 31–50.
- Statista. (2023). Percentage of the population of Shiites in the Middle East in 2023, by country. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/271924/percentage-of-the-population-of-shiites-in-the-middle-east/>
- Ulrichsen, K. C. (2020). *Rebalancing regional security in the Persian Gulf*. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy.
- U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA). (2023). The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important hub for oil transit. *U.S. Energy Information Administration*. <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=61002>
- U.S. National Air and Space Intelligence Center. (2020). *Ballistic and cruise missile threat*. <https://irp.fas.org/threat/missile/bm-2020.pdf>