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Article

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ASSESSMENT OF US-ISRAEL-IRAN CONFLICT: ORIGINS, ESCALATION, AND GLOBAL IMPACT

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Abstract

The US-Israel-Iran conflict remains one of the most persistent and volatile geopolitical crises in contemporary international relations. Rooted in ideological transformation, regional power rivalry, and security concerns, the conflict has evolved from diplomatic hostility into a multidimensional confrontation involving nuclear tensions, proxy warfare, cyber operations, economic sanctions, and military engagements. This study critically assesses the origins, escalation dynamics, and global implications of the conflict within the broader framework of international politics. The study adopted a qualitative analytical review design and utilizes data obtained from scholarly literature, policy reports, institutional publications, and contemporary analytical sources. The analysis is guided primarily by Realist Theory, while also incorporating Constructivist and Institutional perspectives to explain the strategic, ideological, and diplomatic dimensions of the conflict. Findings revealed that the conflict largely originated from the geopolitical and ideological transformations following the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which institutionalized hostility between Iran, the United States, and Israel. The study further showed that escalation patterns have shifted from indirect proxy confrontations to more overt military engagements, particularly following the collapse of nuclear diplomacy and the intensified confrontations witnessed in 2026 involving coordinated airstrikes, missile exchanges, cyber warfare, and maritime tensions in the Strait of Hormuz. The study also found that the conflict has significant political, economic, and security implications globally, including energy market instability, nuclear proliferation concerns, regional militarization, humanitarian crises, and growing geopolitical polarization. The study concludes that sustainable diplomatic engagement and strengthened international cooperation remain essential for reducing regional instability and promoting global security.

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Keywords: US-Israel-Iran Conflict, Proxy Warfare, Cyber Warfare, International Security, Energy Security.

Introduction

The relationship between the United States, Israel, and Iran represents one of the most persistent and unstable geopolitical flashpoints in modern international relations when compared to other international conflicts. What began as ideological and diplomatic tensions in the late twentieth century has developed into a very complex security dilemma involving nuclear proliferation concerns, regional power competition, and recurring episodes of military confrontation. This conflict involving the triangular relationship between the United States, Israel, and Iran turns out not to be merely a bilateral or regional issue but also an issue embedded with broader global power structures, making its trajectory and outcomes significant for international peace and stability (Katz, 2025). The Iranian Revolution may be credited as major factor in the origin of the conflict as it fundamentally altered Iran's foreign policy orientation. The revolution replaced a pro-Western monarchy with an Islamic republic that adopted an explicitly anti-American and anti-Israeli stance (Kéchichian, 2017). This ideological shift disrupted previously cooperative relations and laid the foundation for enduring hostility. The subsequent breakdown in diplomatic relations, exemplified by the Iran hostage crisis, reinforced mutual distrust and positioned Iran as a strategic adversary to both the United States and Israel (Kéchichian, 2017).

A central driver of the conflict in the contemporary era is Iran's nuclear programme, which has generated sustained international concern. Efforts to regulate Iran's nuclear activities through the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) initially offered a framework for diplomatic engagement and conflict de-escalation (Bukhari, 2026). However, the withdrawal of the United States from the agreement in 2018 and the subsequent re-imposition of sanctions significantly undermined the accord and reignited tensions (Minko, 2024). For Israel, Iran's nuclear ambitions represent an existential threat, while for Iran, external pressure is perceived as an infringement on national sovereignty and strategic autonomy. Beyond nuclear issues, the conflict is deeply shaped by regional power competition. Iran has expanded its influence across the Middle East through alliances with non-state actors and proxy groups, a strategy that has intensified its rivalry with Israel and heightened concerns in Washington (Katz, 2025). This indirect confrontation, often described as proxy warfare, has manifested in multiple theatres, including Syria, Lebanon, Gaza Strip and Iraq, thereby transforming localized disputes into interconnected regional crises (Abbasi, 2025). Overtime, these dynamics have increased the likelihood of direct confrontation, particularly as deterrence mechanisms weaken. Recent developments indicate a shift from indirect engagement to more overt military confrontation, raising concerns about large-scale escalation. The strategic importance of critical energy routes, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, further amplifies the global significance of the conflict. Disruptions in this region have immediate implications for global energy markets, international trade, and economic stability (Augustine. 2026). Consequently, the conflict's impact extends far beyond the Middle East, influencing global inflation, security alliances, and diplomatic alignments. Given these complexities, this study aims to provide a comprehensive assessment of the US-Israel-Iran conflict by examining its historical origins, escalating dynamics, and global implications. By synthesizing existing literature and situating the conflict within broader theoretical frameworks, this paper seeks to contribute to a deeper knowledge of one of the most critical security challenges in contemporary international relations.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study is to critically assess the US–Israel–Iran conflict by examining its historical and structural origins, escalation mechanisms and patterns, and its global political, economic, and security implications.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are to:

- i. examine the historical and structural origins of the US–Israel–Iran conflict
- ii. analyze the major escalation mechanisms and patterns shaping the conflict, including proxy warfare, nuclear tensions, military confrontations, cyber operations, and economic sanctions
- iii. assess the global political, economic, and security impacts of the US–Israel–Iran conflict on the international system.

Theoretical Framework

The study is hinged primarily on Realist Theory, while also incorporating elements of Constructivism and Institutionalism to provide a broader understanding of the US-Israel-Iran conflict.

Realist Theory: Realism is one of the dominant theories in international relations and emphasizes the role of power, national interest, and security competition in state behaviour. Charrette and Sterling-Folker (2013) suggested that the international system is anarchic, meaning there is no central authority capable of enforcing order among states. Consequently, states pursue survival through military strength, alliances, and strategic competition. The present conflict strongly reflects realist assumptions. Iran seeks to expand regional influence and strengthen deterrence capabilities in response to perceived threats from the United States and Israel. Similarly, Israel views Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional alliances as existential threats requiring military preparedness and strategic countermeasures. The United States, as a global power, seeks to maintain regional dominance and protect strategic allies such as Israel. Realist theory explains the persistence of the conflict through the concept of the security dilemma, whereby actions taken by one state to enhance security are interpreted as threats by others, leading to cycles of mistrust and escalation.

Constructive Perspective: Constructivism emphasizes the role of identity, ideology, norms, and historical narratives in shaping international relations. Unlike realism, which focuses primarily on material power, constructivism argues that state interests are socially constructed (Sterling-Folker & Badie. 2012). The ideological hostility between Iran, the United States, and Israel illustrates the relevance of constructivism. Iran's revolutionary identity and anti-Western ideology significantly shape its foreign policy orientation. Similarly, historical narratives regarding security, legitimacy, and regional influence the behaviour of all parties involved.

Institutionalism: Institutionalism highlights the importance of international organizations, agreements, and diplomatic institutions in promoting cooperation and reducing conflict (Mayer, 2013). Institutions such as the United Nations and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have played important roles in nuclear negotiations and conflict management (Canton. 2021). The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) demonstrates both the potential and limitations of institutional approaches. While the agreement initially reduced

tensions and enhanced monitoring mechanisms, its eventual collapse revealed the fragility of international cooperation in highly polarized geopolitical environments.

The integration of realism, constructivism, and institutionalism provides a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding the complexity of the US-Israel-Iran conflict. Realism explains strategic competition and security concerns, constructivism addresses ideological and identity-based dimensions, while institutionalism highlights the role of diplomacy and international governance mechanisms. Together, these theories enable a multidimensional interpretation of the conflict's origins, escalation, and global impact.

Methodology

- i. **Research Design:** This research adopts a qualitative analytical review design. This approach combines elements of systematic searching with critical interpretation, allowing the study to address the study holistically. According to Grant and Booth (2009), such a design is particularly suited to complex, multi-dimensional issues where historical, political, and institutional factors intersect.
- ii. **Data Sources and Search Strategy:** In a bid to ensure comprehensive coverage consistent with the study's broad analytical scope, data were sourced from major academic databases including Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar. Given the contemporary and evolving nature of the conflict which the present study focuses on, the study also incorporates policy and real-time analytical sources such as Council on Foreign Relations, BBC, and Reuters. The search covered the period 2000-2026, capturing both the post-Cold War geopolitical context and recent escalatory developments. Keywords were aligned with the aim of the study and included "US-Iran relations," "Israel-Iran conflict," "Middle East tension," amongst others.
- iii. **Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria:** The selection criteria were designed to reflect the study's focus on conflict dynamics and global implications. Included sources comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and credible policy analyses directly addressing the US-Israel-Iran conflict or related security issues. Sources were excluded if they lacked analytical rigour, were purely opinion-based, or did not directly engage with the study's core themes of origins, escalation, or global impact. Only articles published in English language within the defined timeframe were considered to ensure consistency.
- iv. **Data Analysis and Synthesis:** Data analysis followed a thematic analytical approach, structured around the aim and objectives of the study. Extracted information was organized into relevant themes.
- v. **Validity and Reliability:** To ensure analytical consistency with the objectives of the study, the research employed source triangulation, drawing on academic, policy, and institutional materials. The credibility of the sources was carefully evaluated, and emphasis placed on consistency of evidence across multiple accounts.

Results

The present study synthesizes evidence from historical analyses, policy reports, and scholarly literature to examine the origins, escalation patterns, and global implications of the US-Israel-Iran conflict. The findings are organized thematically in line with the objectives of the study.

Origin of the Conflict

The review reveals that the root of the US-Israel-Iran conflict are deeply embedded in geopolitical transformations following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Prior to this, Iran maintained strategic alignment with the United States and informal cooperation with Israel. However, the establishment of the Islamic Republic marked a shift toward ideological opposition to both states, particularly Israel, which Iran does not recognize as a legitimate state (Roomi, 2023). The literature consistently identifies three foundational drivers which are divergence in ideology, security competition, and regional power aspirations. Iran's revolutionary foreign policy, grounded in anti-Western and anti-Israel rhetoric, positioned it as a challenger to US influence in the Middle East (Mousavian & Chitsazian, 2020). At the same time, US strategic commitments to Israel, including military aid and diplomatic backing, reinforced adversarial alignments (Graeber, 2017). In addition, the emergence of proxy networks such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Houthis in Syria, and Hamas in Gaza intensified tensions. These proxies enabled Iran to project influence asymmetrically, thereby circumventing direct confrontation while sustaining regional rivalry (Katz, 2025).

Escalation Dynamics

The findings indicate that the conflict has evolved through multiple phases of escalation characterized by both direct and indirect confrontations. Key escalation triggers include nuclear proliferation concerns, military interventions, and targeted attacks. The Iranian nuclear programme remains a central flashpoint. Western fears regarding potential weaponization led to sanctions regimes and diplomatic efforts such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Saraki & Oladele, 2025). However, the US withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 significantly heightened tensions, leading to renewed sanctions and Iranian non-compliance (Fiedler, 2023). Recently, the tension escalated in 2026 further following renewed US-Israel military operations targeting Iranian military and nuclear-linked infrastructure after the collapse of diplomatic negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme. Iran subsequently intensified retaliatory rhetoric and strategic military activities across the region.

Military escalation has also occurred through proxy warfare and direct engagements. Evidence highlights incidents such as Israeli airstrikes on Iranian assets in Syria and US-led operations targeting Iranian officials, including the killing of General Qassem Soleimani in 2020 (Scott, 2025). These actions contributed to cycles of retaliations and heightened regional instability. More recently, the 2026 conflict witnessed direct missile and drone exchanges between Iran, Israel, and US-linked military assets. Reports by Shankar (2026) indicate that the United States and Israel launched coordinated airstrikes on Iranian military facilities and strategic targets, while Iran responded with retaliatory missile and drone attacks targeting Israeli territories, US military installations, and strategic locations across the Gulf region. Rising hostilities also increased tensions around the Strait of Hormuz, contributing to fears of broader regional warfare. Cyber warfare and economic sanctions further represent non-conventional escalation tools. Sanctions have targeted Iran's economy, while cyberattacks allegedly involving state actors have disrupted nuclear and military infrastructure (Kenan, 2022). The recent 2026 escalation further demonstrated the growing importance of cyber operations, intelligence warfare, maritime blockades, and economic coercion as instruments of geopolitical confrontation among the US, Israel and Iran.

Global Impact

The implications of this conflict are multifaceted as it affects economic stability, international security, and diplomatic relations. In terms of the economy, the literature shows that tensions in the Persian Gulf region influence global oil markets. Disruptions to oil supply routes, particularly the Strait of Hormuz, have triggered fluctuations in energy prices, with broader implications for global inflation and economic growth (Gaffor *et al.*, 2026; Augustine, 2026). Further escalations in 2026 significantly intensified these concerns, as military confrontations and threats to maritime security in the Gulf generated renewed volatility in global oil prices and fears of disruptions to international energy supply chains.

From the perspective of security, the conflict contributes to regional militarization and proliferation risks (Magray *et al.*, 2026). The potential for nuclear escalation raises concerns among global powers, promoting diplomatic interventions and strategic realignments. The expansion of direct military exchanges between Iran, Israel, and US forces in 2026, heightened fears of wider regional conflict, increased military mobilization across the Middle East, and renewed international concern regarding nuclear security and strategic stability. Diplomatically, the conflict has polarized international relations in the sense that while the US and its allies maintain strong support for Israel, other actors such as Russia and China have engaged Iran strategically, thereby complicating global power dynamics (Idris-Etanami & Ehi, 2026). The crisis in 2026 also further exposed divisions within the international community regarding sanctions, military intervention, ceasefire negotiations, and approaches to regional security management. Humanitarian impacts are also evident, particularly in conflict zones such as Syria, where proxy engagements have exacerbated civilian suffering and displacement. Recent escalations in 2026 similarly contributed to renewed humanitarian concerns across the Middle East, including civilian casualties, infrastructure destruction, population displacement, and growing instability in already fragile states.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the complexity and persistence of the US-Israel-Iran conflict as a multidimensional geopolitical struggles shaped by historical legacies, ideological divisions, and strategic interests. The synthesis of this literature reveals that the conflict cannot be adequately explained through a single theoretical lens; rather it reflects an interaction between realist power politics, constructivist identity dynamics, and institutional constraints within the international system. First, the origins of the conflict highlight the enduring significance of ideological transformation in shaping behavior. The 1979 Iranian Revolution fundamentally altered Iran's foreign policy orientation, replacing a pro-Western monarchy with a regime grounded in anti-imperialist and anti-Israel principles. As argued by Scholars such as Takeyh (2009) and Axworthy (2013), this ideological shift institutionalized hostility toward both the US and Israel, embedding conflict within Iran's national identity and strategic doctrine. From a constructive perspective, this suggests that state interests are not categorically fixed but socially constructed through historical experiences and ideological narratives. At the same time, realist interpretations emphasize that Iran's opposition to US and Israeli influence also reflects a rational pursuit of regional power and security, particularly in a context where it perceives encirclement by hostile actors (Waltz, 1979; Ram, 2022).

Second, the escalation dynamics identified in the results section demonstrate that the conflict operates through hybrid and evolving mechanisms. Traditional interstate warfare has largely been avoided, yet this has not reduced the intensity of confrontation.

Instead, the conflict has shifted toward indirect engagement, including proxy warfare, economic sanctions, and cyber operations. Recent events of 2026 demonstrate how rapidly indirect confrontation can evolve into overt military engagement. Coordinated US-Israel airstrikes on Iranian targets, retaliatory Iranian missile and drone attacks, heightened naval tensions in the Strait of Hormuz, and the expansion of regional military deployments collectively signalled a dangerous phase of escalation that increased fears of broader regional war. As Berman and Lake (2019) and Levitt (2021) noted, proxy actors such as Hezbollah enable Iran to exert influence while minimizing the risks associated with direct military confrontation. Similarly, Israeli military strategy has relied on targeted strikes and intelligence operations to counter perceived Iranian threats. The role of the US further complicates escalation patterns. The US policies ranging from sanctions to military interventions have both deterred and provoked Iranian responses. The withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 represents a critical turning point, as it undermined diplomatic engagement and reinforced mutual distrust (Marges, 2021). From an institutionalist perspective, this illustrates the fragility of international agreements in the absence of sustained political commitment. Institutions such as nuclear agreements can mitigate conflict, but their effectiveness depends on compliance and enforcement mechanisms, which are often shaped by domestic political considerations.

Moreover, the increasing use of cyber warfare and economic coercion reflects broader transformations in the nature of international conflict. Lindsay (2015) argued that cyber operations provide states with a means of achieving strategic objectives without crossing the threshold of conventional war. In the context of the present conflict, cyberattacks on nuclear facilities and critical infrastructure represent an extension of geopolitical rivalry into new domains. This shift highlights the adaptability of state strategies in response to technological change and strategic constraints. Third, the global implications of the conflict emphasize its significance beyond the Middle East. The findings demonstrate that regional tensions have direct consequences for global economic stability, particularly through their impact on energy markets. The Strait of Hormuz remains a critical chokepoint for global oil supply, and disruptions have historically triggered fluctuations in oil prices (Gaffor *et al.*, 2026). This interdependence underscores the extent to which localized conflicts can generate systemic economic effects, reinforcing the importance of stability in strategically vital regions.

In addition to economic impacts, the conflict has significant implications for global security and diplomatic relations. The potential for nuclear proliferation remains a central concern, as tensions surrounding Iran's nuclear programme continue to shape international policy responses (Mousavian & Mousavian, 2018). The involvement of major powers such as Russia and China further complicates the geopolitical landscape, as these actors pursue their own strategic interests in relation to Iran. This dynamic reflects a broader shift toward multipolarity in international relations, where competing power centers influence conflict trajectories and limit the effectiveness of collective security mechanisms. However, important limitations remain within the existing literature. Many studies focus on state-level interactions while underemphasizing the role of domestic politics and internal socio-economic factors in shaping foreign policy decisions. For instance, internal political factions within Iran and the United States significantly influence policy direction, yet these dynamics are not always fully integrated into geopolitical analyses (Sichani & Jalalirad, 2025; Bukhari *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, there is a tendency to prioritize security and strategic

considerations over humanitarian impacts, particularly in regions affected by proxy conflicts such as Syria and Yemen.

Another critical issue emerging from the analysis is the gap between policy intentions and outcomes. While diplomatic initiatives such as the JCPOA demonstrate the potential for conflict de-escalation, their limited durability highlights the challenges of sustaining cooperation in a highly polarized environment. As Jervis (1999) and Leverett and Leverett (2013) argued, mistrust and misperception often undermine diplomatic efforts, leading to cycles of escalation even when cooperation would be mutually beneficial. This suggests that future policy approaches must address not only strategic interests but also underlying perceptions and narratives that drive conflict behaviour.

Conclusion

the US-Israel-Iran conflict represents a protracted and evolving geopolitical contest shaped by structural, ideological, and institutional factors. Its persistence reflects the interplay between power competition, identity politics, and the limitations of international governance mechanisms. Addressing this conflict requires a multifaceted approach that integrates diplomatic engagement, institutional strengthening, and a deeper understanding of the political and ideological drivers underpinning state behaviour. Without such an approach, the conflict is likely to remain a central source of regional instability and global uncertainty.

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