



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Iranian Studies Unit Fifth Annual Conference

Iran and the Changing Strategic Landscape of the Middle East

17-18 September 2025

[About the Conference](#) | [Timetable](#) | [Participants](#) | [Abstracts](#) | [Chairs](#)



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About the Conference

The Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is holding its fifth annual conference from 17-18 September 2025. The topic of this year's conference is "Iran and the Changing Strategic Landscape of the Middle East."

The Israeli genocide has triggered a chain of events across the region, including the 12 Day War precipitated by Israel's 13 June 2025 attack on Iran. As a result of the Israeli threat before and after its attack on Iran, Tehran's foreign and security policies have had to adapt to shifting regional dynamics. Iran's network of non-state alliances has been heavily impacted by Israeli actions in Palestine and beyond. Iran's current geopolitical posture emerges in a context where the former Bashar al-Assad-led Syria has been ousted, and Hezbollah – a key ally of Tehran and a central player in the "Axis of Resistance" – has lost its most influential leader, Hassan Nasrallah.

The conference examines various aspects of Iranian foreign and security policy in relation to its immediate environment and the rest of the Middle East. Iran's evolving regional position in light of Israel's war on Gaza, Iranian relations with regional non-state actors, the changing position of the "Axis of Resistance", Iran's relations with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and the impact of regional developments on Iran's domestic politics, are among the main themes that will be discussed in this year's conference of the Iranian Studies Unit.

Timetable

Day 1

Wednesday, 17 September 2025

8:30-9:00	Registration
9:00-9:15	Opening Remarks Mehran Kamrava
9:15-10:15	Keynote Lecture Iran's Perspective on Security Circumstances in the Region Saeed Khatibzadeh
10:15-10:30	Coffee Break
10:30-11:45	Panel 1: Iran's Deterrence Models and National Security Revisions Chair: Aicha Elbasri Hamidreza Azizi: The Collapse of “Forward Defense”: Rethinking Iran's National Security Doctrine After the Twelve-Day War Saeed Shokoohi: Operational Code: A Framework for Understanding Tehran's Perspective on the Middle Eastern Turmoil Mohammad Seyam: The Limits of Deterrence by Proxy: Iran's Strategic Response to Israel's Regional Confrontation After 7 October 2023
11:45-12:45	Lunch

<p>12:45-2:00</p>	<p>Panel 2: Transnationalism and the Nuclear Question in Iran's Security Strategy</p> <p>Chair: Ayat Hamdan</p> <p>Abdolrasool Divsallar: The Failure of Hyper Nuclear Latency as a Deterrence Model: The Case of Iran</p> <p>Adel Al-Hawatmeh: Iran and Regional Hegemony: The Role of Ideational and Material Elements and Endeavours to Achieve It Through the Nuclear Program and Proxies</p> <p>Mohammad Amin Ahmadi and Rooholamin Saeidi: Iran's Balancing Strategy Against Israel After the Gaza War</p>
<p>2:00-2:15</p>	<p>Coffee Break</p>
<p>2:15-3:30</p>	<p>Panel 3: Iran's Strategic Doctrine Post-October 7</p> <p>Chair: Abdelfattah Mady</p> <p>Abbas Maleki and Maryam Hasheminejad: Iran's Strategic Calculus After the 2023 Gaza War: Balancing Deterrence and Regional Security Coalitions</p> <p>Reza Ekhtiari Amiri: The New Order of Post-October 7 and the Shift in Iran's Security Policy</p> <p>Zakiyeh Yazdanshenas: Iran's Deterrence Strategy Post-October 7 and the Regional Security Complex in the Gulf</p>

- Timing of panels is based on Doha local time (GMT +3).

Day 2

Thursday, 18 September 2025

<p>9:00-10:15</p>	<p>Panel 4: Iran-GCC Relations and Regional Diplomacy</p> <p>Chair: Emad Kaddorah</p> <p>Gawdat Bahgat and Katherine Holden: The Thaw in Iran-GCC Relations and the Changing Regional Balance of Power</p> <p>Mehran Haghirian: Shifting Tides in the Gulf: Growing Diplomatic Engagements between Iran and the GCC States in a Changing Middle East</p> <p>Roxana Niknami: The European Union's Policies in the Gulf: Shaping Iran-Arab Relations Through Diplomacy and Power Dynamics</p>
<p>10:15-10:30</p>	<p>Coffee Break</p>
<p>10:30-11:45</p>	<p>Panel 5: Ideology and Resistance in Iran's Security Doctrine</p> <p>Chair: Laila Omar</p> <p>Mohammad Homayounvash: Resistance Ethos in Iran's Strategic Culture: Qur'anic, Shi'i, and Constitutional Underpinnings</p> <p>Mohammad Kalantari: The Security Dilemma of Influence: Shi'i Transnationalism and the Limits of Iranian Foreign Policy</p> <p>Ahmed Abozaid: Clash of <i>'Aṣabiyyāt</i>: A Neo-Khaldunian Perspective on Iranian-Israeli Rivalry in the Post-October 2023 Israeli War on Gaza</p>
<p>11:45-12:45</p>	<p>Lunch</p>

<p>12:45-2:00</p>	<p>Panel 6: Sanctions, Security Competition, and Adaptation</p> <p>Chair: Mohammed Hemchi</p> <p>Pinar Arıkan-Sinkaya* and Bayram Sinkaya: The Türkiye-Iran Rivalry over the New Syria: Preliminary Outcomes for Middle Eastern Geopolitics</p> <p>Zeinab Nikookar: Sanctions and Strategic Adaptation: Assessing Iran's Military Power</p> <p>Kahlan Abdulaziz Al-Shugaa: Iranian Influence in the Bab al-Mandeb: Geopolitical Tools and the Implications of Regional Changes</p>
<p>2:00-2:15</p>	<p>Coffee Break</p>
<p>2:15-3:30</p>	<p>Panel 7: Military Capabilities and Emerging Security Frontiers</p> <p>Chair: Abdou Moussa</p> <p>Sobia Khursheed: Implications of Iran's Ballistic Missile and Drone Program on the Regional Security Apparatus of the Middle East</p> <p>Kardo Rached and Kawther Fattahi: Iranian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The KRG as a Case Study</p> <p>Khalifa Ahmed Al-Kuwari: Iran's Cyber Role in Regional Conflicts: Analysing Iranian Cyberspace Strategies and Their Impact on Regional Dynamics</p>
<p>3:30-3:45</p>	<p>Coffee Break</p>
<p>3:45-5:00</p>	<p>Panel 8: Non-State Actors and Iran's Regional Strategy</p> <p>Chair: Mehran Kamrava</p> <p>Jawad El Kassemi: Iran's Proxies: A Comparative Study of Empowerment and Deployment Strategies Between Hezbollah and the Houthis</p> <p>Ebrahim Meraji: Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Proxy Strategy: A Cost-Benefit Analysis</p> <p>Mehran Kamrava: Iran and the Changing Strategic Landscape of the Middle East</p>

* Attending online

- Timing of panels is based on Doha local time (GMT +3).

Participants

Abstracts



Adel Al-Hawatmeh

Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Affairs at Lusail University, Qatar. He holds a PhD from the University of York, UK (2024). His current research focuses on critical discourse analysis, Iran, nuclear proliferation, economic sanctions, and the Palestinian cause. He previously served as a Lecturer at the German Jordanian University, a staff member at the Jordanian House of Representatives, and Field Researcher at the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan.

Iran and Regional Hegemony: The Role of Ideational and Material Elements and Endeavours to Achieve It Through the Nuclear Program and Proxies

This article explores the role of material and ideational elements in shaping Iran's identity and national interest, and how the latter directs Iranian foreign policy in its pursuit of regional hegemony in the Middle East. Despite setbacks affecting material elements – such as the loss of certain proxies, and the diminished strategic, political, and security value of the nuclear program, especially after the 2015 agreement and the recent setbacks in 2025 – Iran still retains ideational drivers rooted in its Persian heritage, the values of the Iranian Revolution, and Islam. These factors make the pursuit of regional hegemony a constant and primary objective. The elements constituting Iran's national interest may at times conflict or complement each other, playing relative roles. The study employs a qualitative methodology, applying critical discourse analysis based on Laclau and Mouffe's model to selected speeches by Supreme Leaders Ruhollah Khomeini and Ali Khamenei. The paper concludes that ideational elements play a significant role in continuously propelling Iran toward achieving regional hegemony, despite the relative loss of some material elements – namely, its proxies in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and the Iranian nuclear program – through the reshaping of Iranian identity, which in turn drives the realization of Iran's national interest via foreign policy. The research findings indicate that ideational elements, as reflected in Iran's narrative discourse, are more influential than material elements such as reliance on regional proxies or the nuclear program.



Khalifa Ahmed Al-Kuwari

Faculty member at Qatar Police Academy and Lecturer at Qatar Cyber Space Academy. He holds a PhD in International Law from the University of Bradford, UK. He completed his specialized training in cyber operations at the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence (CCDCOE) and the International Cyber Law Academy. His research interests include international law of cyber operations, regional cooperation in cyber operations with focus on Gulf Cooperation Council countries, cyber sovereignty, and human rights applications in the digital domain. His key publications include: "A New Application of Article 36 of the Geneva Convention's Additional Protocol: The Case of Autonomous Cyber Weapons" (*Bradford Law Journal*, 2023), "Applicability of International Humanitarian Law in Cyberspace" (*Journal of Legal & Security Studies*, 2024).

Iran's Cyber Role in Regional Conflicts: Analysing Iranian Cyberspace Strategies and Their Impact on Regional Dynamics

This study aims to analyse Iranian cyber strategies in regional conflicts and assess their compliance with international law principles. The study presents a central argument that Iran exploits legal ambiguity in cyberspace to execute asymmetric offensive operations that compensate for its traditional military weaknesses, while adopting selective legal interpretations that serve its interests. The study is divided into three sections: the first establishes the legal framework for cyber conflict and analyses Iran's position on international law principles; the second presents applied case studies of prominent cyber incidents (Albania 2022, Gulf attacks, conflict with Israel, the Twelve-Day War); and the third discusses regional and international implications. The study employs a legal analysis methodology and comparative case study approach, drawing on official documents, intelligence reports, and specialized academic sources. The study concludes that Iranian cyber behaviour, despite achieving tactical gains, faces increasing strategic challenges with the evolution of international norms and the strengthening of counter-alliances.



Kahlan Abdulaziz Al-Shugaa

Research professional specializing in development studies. He holds a Master's degree in International Development from the Gender Development Research and Studies Center at Sana'a University, Yemen (2024). His work experiences focus on data analysis, policy research, and nonprofit sector development in the Arab region.

Iranian Influence in the Bab El-Mandeb: Geopolitical Tools and the Implications of Regional Changes

This paper seeks to analyse Iranian influence in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait by deconstructing its geopolitical instruments and assessing their effectiveness and future prospects in light of regional changes since 7 October 2023. It challenges the notion of the effectiveness of the asymmetric deterrence strategy that Tehran has relied on for decades, starting from the premise that this strategy's effectiveness has declined due to regional and international responses shifting toward a more offensive approach in dealing with the groups Iran employs as external defensive buffers. The core argument of the paper states that Iran has increasingly banked on the Bab al-Mandeb card – through the Houthis and armed groups in the Horn of Africa – as one of its last remaining tools in the balance of conflict after its setbacks in Lebanon and Syria. The paper includes a critical review of the existing literature, a detailed analysis of Iran's instruments of influence (the Houthis and African armed groups), and an examination of the implications of regional changes for these instruments and their future trajectories. The study adopts a geopolitics-based analytical approach to understand how Iran's security strategy leverages armed groups in the Bab al-Mandeb region. It concludes that the coming stage may witness a peak in Iran's use of these groups, followed by their gradual collapse due to military strikes, the closure of smuggling routes, and popular pressure – paving the way for the restoration of the role of the nation-state.



Ahmed Abozaid

Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Chicago. He has held positions at the University of Cambridge, University of Southampton, Columbia University, and the University of St Andrews. He has published three books in English, nine books in Arabic, and over 70 peer-reviewed papers in both Arabic and English. His forthcoming book with the Oxford University Press is on the political theory of Ibn Khaldun.

The Clash of ‘*Aṣabiyyāt*: A Neo-Khaldunian Perspective on Iranian-Israeli Rivalry in the Post-October 2023 Israeli War on Gaza

This paper explores the intensified military conflict between Israel and Iran, known as the "Twelve-Day War", through the lens of ‘*aṣabiyyāt*, identity-based politics, and political tribalism. To do so, this study moves beyond state-centric approaches that conventionally analyse armed conflicts through Eurocentric realist or liberal paradigms that emphasize state behaviour, institutional frameworks, and strategic interests. Instead, it foregrounds a *Khaldūnian* analytical factor (i.e. the ‘*aṣabiyyāt*) that has been markedly neglected in mainstream international relations and security studies, as a focal point for analysing conflict, alliance, and global transformations in regional political competition. Specifically, this study critically compares between "the Clash of ‘*aṣabiyyāt*" and two influential theses (Amy Chua and Samuel Huntington) to reveal how internal sociopolitical configurations and factions (state and non-state actors alike) within the MENA region, as well as regional and global political identities, shape interpretations of the conflict. I argue that in an increasingly polarized global order, where ‘*aṣabiyyāt*, tribal, and identity-driven forces often supersede ideological consistency or national cohesion, these paradigms often overlook the internal dynamics and sociopolitical narratives that significantly influence foreign policy, and shape policy and public perception of domestic, regional, and global politics.



Mohammad Amin Ahmadi

Master's student in International Relations at the Faculty of Political Science and Islamic Studies, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran. His research focuses on Iran's foreign policy with an emphasis on international relations theories. He is the author of six academic articles and the translator of two books, and he has participated in and presented at several national and international conferences. He will begin his PhD in International Relations in September 2025.

Iran's Balancing Strategy Against Israel After the Gaza War

Following the 7 October 2023 operation and the subsequent escalation of tensions in the Middle East, Iran's regional power dynamics have been significantly reshaped. This paper seeks to answer the question: How has the weakening of Iran's regional allies and the collapse of key partnerships, such as that with Syria, impacted Iran's balance of power against Israel, and how is Iran likely to restore this balance in response to these challenges? The objective of this study is to analyse how the weakening of Iran's alliances has undermined Iran's position in the region. It also asks how Iran is being pushed to restore this balance by heavily investing in its own internal military capabilities, particularly through the enhancement of its missile technology and potential changes in its nuclear doctrine. To address these questions, this study employs a descriptive-analytical method based on historical and contemporary data, drawing from primary sources such as regional diplomatic reports and military assessments. The research considers the possibility that, as these regional shifts continue, Iran may reconsider its nuclear doctrine in response to heightened security threats and its need to restore strategic deterrence. The findings suggest that Iran's increasing focus on military investment, especially in missile technology and fortifications, reflects its efforts to regain a favourable balance of power with Israel.



Reza Ekhtiari Amiri

Associate Professor of International Relations at the University of Mazandaran, Iran. He has held a position as a Senior Visiting Researcher at the Middle East Strategic Studies Institute and has published extensively in both Persian and English on regional geopolitical and security issues. His scholarly contributions appear in academic journals and policy-oriented publications, reflecting his expertise in Middle Eastern affairs. His research focuses on Iranian foreign and security policy, Saudi Arabian politics and governance, and the broader international relations and security dynamics of the Middle East.

The New Order of Post-October 7 and the Shift in Iran's Security Policy

This study analyses the evolution of Iran's security policy in response to the emerging regional order precipitated by the events of 7 October 2023. The findings demonstrate that Iran's security strategy, influenced by the diminished power of the "Axis of Resistance" and the shifting regional power dynamics following the Al-Aqsa Storm incident, is characterized by a hybrid balancing approach, integrating both internal and external balancing strategies. Internal balancing is centred on strengthening and further enhancing military and defensive capabilities, as well as fostering nationalism, national spirit, and unity. Meanwhile, external balancing is manifested through the improvement of political-military relations with tactical allies (particularly Russia and China), the redefinition of ties with regional states (especially Lebanon), support for the status quo in Syria and Yemen, the maintenance of relations with the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) militia in Iraq, and the consolidation of relations with neighbouring states. The findings also indicate that due to divergent geopolitical priorities between Iran and its tactical allies, as well as other regional states, Iran's hybrid balancing strategy is fragile and unreliable. The study employs the theoretical framework of structural realism and utilizes a descriptive-analytical methodology.



Hamidreza Azizi

Visiting Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. He also serves as a Nonresident Fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs in Doha and as an associate researcher at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael. He holds a PhD in Regional Studies from the University of Tehran and has lectured at several Iranian universities, including the University of Tehran (2016–2018) and Shahid Beheshti University (2016–2020). His research focuses on security and geopolitical issues in the Middle East and Central Eurasia, Iran's foreign and security policy, and Iran-Russia relations.

The Collapse of "Forward Defense": Rethinking Iran's National Security Doctrine After the Twelve-Day War

This article examines the collapse of Iran's "forward defense" doctrine in the wake of the 2023–2025 regional escalation culminating in the June 2025 war with Israel. Designed to deter conflict through strategic depth, delegated deterrence, and hybrid military capabilities, Iran's doctrine has unravelled as these pillars proved ineffective under direct confrontation. Drawing on the Gaza war and subsequent events, the article argues that Iran's reliance on non-state actors, geographic buffers, and missile coercion no longer delivers strategic insulation in a region transformed by technological asymmetry and shifting alliance structures. The Twelve-Day War revealed an escalation pathology in which Iran, lacking reliable buffers or cohesive alliances, was forced into costly direct warfare – precisely what forward defense aims to avoid. The paper further explores Iran's post-war adaptations, including naval reorientation, potential shifts in nuclear posture, and evolving partnerships with China and Russia. While these responses reflect tactical improvisation, they fall short of a coherent replacement for the defunct doctrine. The article concludes that Iran's future deterrence doctrine will require more than incremental adjustments; it demands a redefinition of power projection, security and economic vulnerabilities, and regional influence.



Gawdat Bahgat

Distinguished Professor at the National Defense University in Washington DC. His areas of expertise include energy security, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, political economy and US foreign policy in the middle east. He is the author of 11 books and more than 200 academic articles. He has more than 30 years of government and academic experience.

The Thaw in Iran-GCC Relations and the Changing Regional Balance of Power

The wars in Gaza and Lebanon and Israel/US strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities have significantly changed the security landscape in the Middle East with important potential changes in the relations between major regional powers. This essay examines how Iran-GCC relations are evolving in light of these military conflicts. Since the early 2020s the two sides have sought to reduce tension and promote economic and political cooperation. We argue that these de-escalation efforts are likely to persist for at least three reasons: (a) both GCC states and Iran are focusing on economic development, and they have articulated ambitious plans to diversify their economies; (b) they seek to restore a regional balance of power; (c) global powers (i.e., the US, Russia, and China) are interested in political stability. The essay analyses Iran's relations with the GCC both as a bloc and as individual states.



Abdolrasool Divsallar

Senior Researcher at the UN Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR). He is also a visiting professor at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. He holds a PhD in Political Science – Iranian Studies from the University of Tehran. He has authored and edited eight books, including *Struggle for Alliance: Russia and Iran in the Era of War in Ukraine* (2024), and has published numerous peer-reviewed journal articles. Before joining UNIDIR, he co-led the Regional Security Initiative at the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, worked as a researcher at the Defense Industries Training and Research Institute, and the Center for Strategic Studies in Tehran. His research focuses on the intersection of security and regional studies. His interests include military strategies in the Gulf, security assistance, and nuclear non-proliferation issues.

The Failure of Hyper Nuclear Latency as a Deterrence Model: The Case of Iran

Debates about potential changes in Iran's military doctrine and the shift to nuclear deterrence gained prominence in public discussions after the 2024 Iran-Israel clashes. These debates intensified within Iran and were widely echoed among external observers and stakeholders, raising concerns about the future of Iran's nuclear program. Often, these debates focus on the non-proliferation approach, which assumes that Iran has the technical capability, sufficient nuclear material, and know-how to develop a nuclear warhead quickly. However, there is less discussion about nuclear posture and the conventional military requirements needed to establish effective nuclear deterrence. Does possessing technical nuclear capabilities and even a few warheads necessarily ensure nuclear deterrence? Why did the strategy of nuclear latency fail in Iran's case? What do these limitations in establishing nuclear deterrence reveal about Iran's future defence strategy? This paper argues that, due to conventional military weaknesses, Iran needs years to overcome the complex challenges of integrating a nuclear warhead into its military and developing a nuclear doctrine. This is the main reason why military and security elites remain cautious about building a nuclear warhead.



Kawther Fattahi

English-Persian translator and freelance journalist at *The New York Times*. She holds dual bachelor's degrees in Diplomacy and Public Relations, and English Translation. With a strong background in media and cross-cultural communication, she brings expertise in accurate, context-sensitive translation.

Iranian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The KRG as a Case Study

This study uses James Rosenau's foreign policy theory (Rosenau, 1966) to analyse Iran's foreign policy toward the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). It examines how Iran's national security strategy, which is also part of its foreign policy (FP), changed between 1991 and the post-referendum era in 2017, emphasizing the shift from ideological convictions to practical concerns impacted by regional and domestic factors. This study illustrates how Iran's foreign policy toward the KRG has changed since the referendum by looking into each Iranian president's foreign policy towards the KRG from Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) until Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), under whose tenure the KRG conducted a national referendum (2017) that forced Iran to change its policy very radically. The study categorically looks into each president's FP by using Rosenau's theory.



Mehran Haghirian

Director of Regional Initiatives at the Bourse & Bazaar Foundation. His work centres on conflict resolution and diplomacy, with a particular focus on the Gulf region. He holds a PhD in Gulf Studies from Qatar University and a master's degree in International Affairs from American University's School of International Service in Washington, DC. He has previously served as a researcher and assistant director at the Ibn Khaldon Centre for Humanities and Social Sciences and a program assistant at the Atlantic Council's Future of Iran Initiative. Currently, he leads the Integrated Futures Initiative and the Rihla Initiative for Green Economic Growth.

Shifting Tides in the Gulf: Growing Diplomatic Engagements Between Iran and the GCC States in a Changing Middle East

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of the foreign policy strategies of the Arab states of the Gulf toward Iran, using a novel critical framework that incorporates internal dynamics, regional geopolitics, international relations, and the consequences of key critical events. Through a comparative approach, the study demonstrates that while the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states may exhibit surface-level similarities in behaviour, their decision-making calculus toward Iran varies significantly, shaped by differing perceptions of threat, regime structures, and strategic interests. This variation becomes particularly clear when analysing the divergent responses to major geopolitical developments such as the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign and the 2023 Saudi-Iran rapprochement. The Critical Framework introduced in this study not only enables quantifiable comparison across states and time periods but also offers predictive insights into how future regional or international developments, such as renewed Iran-U.S. diplomacy or a collapse of the nuclear non-proliferation regime, might impact GCC-Iran dynamics. Ultimately, the paper underscores that the GCC is not a monolithic bloc but a grouping of distinct foreign policy approaches, and that understanding this heterogeneity is essential to any effort aimed at fostering sustainable regional diplomacy and security architecture.



Maryam Hasheminejad

Master's student in Global Risk at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS Europe). She was previously a PhD student in International Relations at Shahid Beheshti University, Iran, and holds an MA in Regional Studies from Allameh Tabataba'i University. Her research examines geopolitical, economic, and political risks in the Middle East, with a particular focus on strategic shifts and regional security dynamics.

Iran's Strategic Calculus After the 2023 Gaza War: Balancing Deterrence and Regional Security Coalitions

This paper analyses the strategic recalibration of Iran's regional posture following the 2023 Gaza War. This event highlighted the operational and strategic constraints of Iran's proxy-based coalition strategy and the growing risks of unilateral deterrence, leading Tehran to consider a reassessment of its regional doctrine. The study addresses a gap in existing literature by systematically comparing two key options available to Iran: (1) reinforcing sovereign deterrence through precision missile capabilities, cyber operations, and nuclear ambiguity, and (2) revitalizing regional coalition networks with both state and non-state actors. Employing a geopolitical risk assessment framework, the paper evaluates each strategy across long-term strategic costs and benefits. The analysis reveals that while each path offers distinct advantages, both carry increasing vulnerabilities in the post-war environment, ranging from proxy fragility and Arab-Israeli normalization to heightened U.S. and Israeli threat perceptions. The paper argues that coalition-based deterrence appears increasingly constrained as a conflict-prevention strategy, and that sovereign deterrence – while more prone to escalation risks – remains Iran's most dependable strategy. However, the risks associated with it require parallel investment in calibrated diplomacy to prevent strategic miscalculation. The study concludes by proposing a hybrid approach: one that combines defensive autonomy with proactive diplomatic signalling to preserve deterrence without triggering war.



Katherine Holden

Professional in Middle Eastern and North African affairs with experience in diplomacy, public policy, and international security. She has worked with the US Department of State, the Department of Defense's Near East South Asia Center, and the Washington International Diplomatic Academy. She holds a master's in Global Studies and a bachelor's in International Studies with a minor in Arabic from the University of Oklahoma. Her published research in peer-reviewed journals and policy outlets addresses Gulf security, regional energy policy, and the geopolitics of Sudan and Libya.

The Thaw in Iran-GCC Relations and the Changing Regional Balance of Power

The wars in Gaza and Lebanon and Israel/US strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities have significantly changed the security landscape in the Middle East with important potential changes in the relations between major regional powers. This essay examines how Iran-GCC relations are evolving in light of these military conflicts. Since the early 2020s the two sides have sought to reduce tension and promote economic and political cooperation. We argue that these de-escalation efforts are likely to persist for at least three reasons: (a) both GCC states and Iran are focusing on economic development, and they have articulated ambitious plans to diversify their economies; (b) they seek to restore a regional balance of power; (c) global powers (i.e., the US, Russia, and China) are interested in political stability. The essay analyses Iran's relations with the GCC both as a bloc and as individual states.



Mohammad Homayounvash

Founding Director of the Jaffer Institute for Interfaith Dialogue and Education at Miami Dade College, who also lectures in International Relations at the University of Miami and Florida International University (FIU). He holds a PhD in International Relations from FIU. He is the author of *Iran and the Nuclear Question: History and Evolutionary Trajectory* (Routledge, 2017), a critical examination of Iran's nuclear diplomacy within the broader context of international non-proliferation regimes. His current research explores the geopolitical and ethical implications of artificial intelligence, algorithmic governance, and digital sovereignty in the Global South, with emphasis on the Muslim world.

Resistance Ethos in Iran's Strategic Culture: Qur'anic, Shi'i, and Constitutional Underpinnings

This paper examines the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy through the lens of strategic culture, focusing on the doctrinal centrality of *moqavemat* (resistance). It argues that Iran's resistance posture constitutes a coherent, ideationally grounded doctrine derived from Qur'anic injunctions, particularly *nafy-e sabil* (denial of subjugation), Shi'i political theology, and constitutional mandates. The study traces how the Ashura paradigm, the legacy of Imam Hasan's strategic forbearance, and the Islamic Republic's constitutional provisions institutionalize resistance as both a theological obligation and a strategic necessity. It analyses how this ethos shapes Iran's deterrence doctrine, strategic depth, and the transnational Axis of Resistance, conceptualized as a normatively cohesive, anti-hegemonic security community.



Mohammad Kalantari

Associate Professor of International Relations and Director of the Centre for Islamic and West Asian Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London, and serves as Associate Editor of the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. His research focuses on the international politics of the Middle East, especially political Islam, Shi'i Islam, and transnational political networks. He employs historical sociology and network analysis to examine clerical authority, identity formation, and regional power relations. He is the author of *The Clergy and the Modern Middle East: Shi'i Political Activism in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon* (Bloomsbury, 2021).

The Security Dilemma of Influence: Shi'i Transnationalism and the Limits of Iranian Foreign Policy

This paper interrogates the limits of Iran's foreign policy by conceptualising the *security dilemma of influence*: the condition in which transnational strategies, once a source of identity and power, generate new insecurities. Since 1979, Iran's regional posture has been shaped by a revolutionary commitment to Shi'i transnationalism. While initially effective in projecting influence and reaffirming post-revolutionary identity, this model now faces mounting challenges. Regional backlash, waning symbolic authority, and growing disillusionment among Iran's own citizenry have undermined its efficacy. Drawing on ontological security theory and historical sociology, the paper argues that identity-affirming foreign policy routines now produce contradiction rather than coherence. In Iraq, Lebanon, and even Iran, transnational resistance narratives increasingly clash with pluralistic, nationalist political cultures. These contradictions do not simply represent policy failures but reveal a deeper ontological trap, wherein efforts to stabilise identity through foreign policy generate chronic dissonance. The paper contends that Iran's continued reliance on these routines erodes both domestic legitimacy and regional traction. Without recalibrating its narrative to integrate the evolving interplay between nationalism and Shi'i identity, Iran risks remaining locked in a structural cycle of insecurity, undermining its ability to achieve both ontological reassurance and strategic influence.



Jawad El Kassemi

Researcher and analyst in Political Studies and International Relations, holding a PhD in Political Studies and Public Law from the University of Fez. He serves as a visiting professor at the Universities of Fez and Rabat, an official in the International Cooperation Department at the Ministry of National Education, and the Vice President of the Tafkir Center for Studies and Research. His research focuses on international security, climate change, and geopolitical dynamics in the Middle East. His most prominent works include: "The Controversy over the Iranian Nuclear Program: A Legal and Political Analysis of the Crisis of Trust" (*Ibn Khaldun Journal for Studies and Research*, 2025) and "Climate Change as a Threat to International Peace and Security" (*Middle East Affairs Journal*, 2025).

Iran's Proxies: A Comparative Study of Empowerment and Deployment Strategies Between Hezbollah and the Houthis

This study aims to deconstruct Iran's proxy warfare strategy, moving beyond approaches that treat its proxies as a homogeneous bloc. Using a comparative case study methodology, the research analyses Iran's divergent strategies of empowerment and utilization with two pivotal models: Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen. The main argument of the study is that Iran does not pursue a single approach, but rather a dual strategy. It forges a long-term "organic partnership" with its ideological allies (Hezbollah), with the aim of building a comprehensive strategic deterrent. In contrast, it adopts a tactical "pragmatic alliance" with situational groups (the Houthis) to exploit geopolitical opportunities and exhaust regional rivals. The study is divided into two main sections: the first reviews the theoretical framework of empowerment mechanisms (military, financial, political, and ideological) and their manifestations in the two case studies. The second offers a comparative analysis of the strategic roles assigned to each proxy and evaluates the implications of this dual strategy for the regional security architecture and balance of power. This paper contributes by presenting a new analytical framework for understanding the flexibility of Iranian foreign policy and its capacity for adaptation.



Sobia Khursheed

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Implications of Iran's Ballistic Missile and Drone Program on the Regional Security Apparatus of the Middle East

Contemporary warfare has evolved from conventional battlefield engagements to advanced and asymmetrical strategies, with missiles and drone technologies emerging as a critical component in modern military doctrines. In the Middle East, a region marked by a zero-sum security order, historical rivalries, and a trust deficit, Iran has effectively developed and deployed sophisticated ballistic missiles and drone technologies as a cornerstone of its warfare strategy. Iran leverages these technologies to project deterrence, counter its adversaries, maintain national pride, and influence the regional security architecture. The Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) framework suggests that these advancements have a substantial impact on the strategic calculation of regional and global states, particularly Gulf states, Israel, and the US, whilst Iran's growing cooperation with Russia and China affects regional alignments. RSCT provides a comprehensive understanding of how Iran's evolving military strategy interacts with regional security shifts and contributes to strategic stability or perpetuates a cycle of counterbalancing with regional actors, leading to mutual suspicion and arms proliferation in an already volatile geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. The study establishes an interplay between Iran's evolution and utilization of these technologies and response from regional states, underscoring the potential of conflict escalation while offering insights into the broader consequences for the regional security architecture.



Abbas Maleki

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Iran's Strategic Calculus After the 2023 Gaza War: Balancing Deterrence and Regional Security Coalitions

This paper analyses the strategic recalibration of Iran's regional posture following the 2023 Gaza War. This event highlighted the operational and strategic constraints of Iran's proxy-based coalition strategy and the growing risks of unilateral deterrence, leading Tehran to consider a reassessment of its regional doctrine. The study addresses a gap in existing literature by systematically comparing two key options available to Iran: (1) reinforcing sovereign deterrence through precision missile capabilities, cyber operations, and nuclear ambiguity, and (2) revitalizing regional coalition networks with both state and non-state actors. Employing a geopolitical risk assessment framework, the paper evaluates each strategy across long-term strategic costs and benefits. The analysis reveals that while each path offers distinct advantages, both carry increasing vulnerabilities in the post-war environment, ranging from proxy fragility and Arab-Israeli normalization to heightened U.S. and Israeli threat perceptions. The paper argues that coalition-based deterrence appears increasingly constrained as a conflict-prevention strategy, and that sovereign deterrence—while more prone to escalation risks—remains Iran's most dependable strategy. However, the risks associated with it require parallel investment in calibrated diplomacy to prevent strategic miscalculation. The study concludes by proposing a hybrid approach: one that combines defensive autonomy with proactive diplomatic signalling to preserve deterrence without triggering war.



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Neoclassical Realism and Iran's Proxy Strategy: A Cost-Benefit Analysis

Since 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has relied on regional proxy groups to project influence and counter perceived threats from hostile neighbours and Western allies. These non-state actors, aligned with Iran's anti-Western and anti-Israel stance, have long been central to its regional strategy. However, the 7 October 2023, Hamas attack, Israel's subsequent military response, and the direct Iran-Israel war in June 2025 severely weakened these networks. The latter conflict saw Israeli strikes on Iranian nuclear and missile facilities, US military support for Israel, and the assassination of senior Iranian officials. The fall of Syria's pro-Iranian government further compounded Tehran's challenges. Framed within a neoclassical realist approach, this study examines whether Iran will reinvest in rebuilding its proxies or recalibrate its regional strategy. Three factors shape this decision: (1) severe domestic economic constraints, (2) shifting regional power dynamics reducing the effectiveness of proxy warfare, and (3) intensified US-Israeli pressure under a second Trump administration. While ideological and security imperatives favour continued proxy support, evolving geopolitical and economic realities may push Iran toward strategic adjustment. The findings suggest Iran's future course will hinge on its leadership's willingness to balance ideology with pragmatic security needs.



Roxana Niknami

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The European Union's Policies in the Gulf: Shaping Iran-Arab Relations Through Diplomacy and Power Dynamics

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has taken a more active role in the Gulf, strengthening its diplomatic, economic, and security ties with Arab states. While these policies aim to enhance the EU's presence in the region, they also have significant implications for Iran's relationships with its Arab neighbours. This study explores how the EU's growing involvement in the Gulf is influencing Iran-Arab relations, asking: how do the EU's policies in the Gulf shape Iran's interactions with Arab countries? The research argues that by deepening its engagement with Arab Gulf states, the EU is subtly shifting the regional balance of power. This shift presents Iran with both opportunities for cooperation and strategic challenges. Using the SWOT analysis framework, the study assesses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that EU policies create for Iran. The analysis is guided by Stephen Walt's balance of threat theory, which suggests that states react not just to power shifts but to perceived threats. As the EU strengthens its relationships with Arab states, Iran may adjust its approach – either by seeking engagement with Europe, or by reinforcing alliances elsewhere. This research first examines the EU's policies in the region, then evaluates their impact on Iran-Arab dynamics using SWOT analysis, and finally considers possible future scenarios. By understanding the EU's evolving role in the Gulf, we can gain deeper insight into how international actors shape the region's geopolitical landscape and influence Iran's foreign policy choices.



Zeinab Nikookar

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Sanctions and Strategic Adaptation: Assessing Iran's Military Power

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has faced extensive sanctions targeting its nuclear and missile programs, yet these sanctions have failed to significantly change its policies or curb Middle East conflicts. Instead, Iran has continued to expand its military influence and presence in the Middle East, particularly through ballistic missiles and drones. This study investigates how sanctions have impacted Iran's strategic military responses and self-reliance capabilities. Drawing on structural realism, specifically Mearsheimer's offensive and Waltz's defensive brands, this study explores Iran's resilience and strategic alternatives through military self-reliance, non-Western alliances (China and Russia), and support for the "Axis of Resistance" (i.e. Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis). Using a qualitative case study approach and process tracing, the research analyses causal relationship between sanctions and Iran's military strategies. Despite setbacks in the 2025 Iran-Israel war, Iran's advancements in ballistic missile and drone technology underscore its deterrence strategy. Findings demonstrate that while sanctions have constrained Iran's economy and international partnerships, they have incentivized Iran's resilience. However, vulnerabilities persist due to proxy losses and limited ally support. This research offers critical insights into Iran's strategic adaptation under economic sanctions.



Kardo Rached

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Iranian Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The KRG as a Case Study

This study uses James Rosenau's foreign policy theory (Rosenau, 1966) to analyse Iran's foreign policy toward the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). It examines how Iran's national security strategy, which is also part of its foreign policy (FP), changed between 1991 and the post-referendum era in 2017, emphasizing the shift from ideological convictions to practical concerns impacted by regional and domestic factors. This study illustrates how Iran's foreign policy toward the KRG has changed since the referendum by looking into each Iranian president's foreign policy towards the KRG from Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) until Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021), under whose tenure the KRG conducted a national referendum (2017) that forced Iran to change its policy very radically. The study categorically looks into each president's FP by using Rosenau's theory.



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Iran's Balancing Strategy Against Israel After the Gaza War

Following the 7 October 2023 operation and the subsequent escalation of tensions in the Middle East, Iran's regional power dynamics have been significantly reshaped. This paper seeks to answer the question: How has the weakening of Iran's regional allies and the collapse of key partnerships, such as that with Syria, impacted Iran's balance of power against Israel, and how is Iran likely to restore this balance in response to these challenges? The objective of this study is to analyse how the weakening of Iran's alliances has undermined Iran's position in the region. It also asks how Iran is being pushed to restore this balance by heavily investing in its own internal military capabilities, particularly through the enhancement of its missile technology and potential changes in its nuclear doctrine. To address these questions, this study employs a descriptive-analytical method based on historical and contemporary data, drawing from primary sources such as regional diplomatic reports and military assessments. The research considers the possibility that, as these regional shifts continue, Iran may reconsider its nuclear doctrine in response to heightened security threats and its need to restore strategic deterrence. The findings suggest that Iran's increasing focus on military investment, especially in missile technology and fortifications, reflects its efforts to regain a favourable balance of power with Israel.



Mohammad Seyam

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The Limits of Deterrence by Proxy: Iran's Strategic Response to Israel's Regional Confrontation After 7 October 2023

The study investigates Iran's strategic posture and regional influence following the 7 October 2023 Hamas-led attack on Israel, known as Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. It highlights the limitations in Iran's deterrence-by-proxy doctrine, which relies on non-state actors like Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis to project power while maintaining plausible deniability. The study examines Iran's restrained response to the Israeli counteroffensive and evaluates setbacks across five key fronts: Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, direct military confrontation with Israel, and Iran's broader political reputation. Using a qualitative case study approach, the findings suggest that Iran's regional strategy has suffered unprecedented degradation between 2023 and 2025 as key proxies are neutralized, strategic assets are destroyed, and Iran's ability to deter Israel is questioned. The collapse of the Assad regime, the loss of Hezbollah's leadership, and direct strikes on Iranian soil marked a turning point in Iran's role as the leader of the "Axis of Resistance." The study concludes that Iran must recalibrate its foreign policy to account for its diminished deterrence credibility and the evolving dynamics of high-tech conventional warfare in the Middle East.



Saeed Shokoohi

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Operational Code: A Framework for Understanding Tehran's Perspective on the Middle Eastern Turmoil

Iran's foreign policy behaviour has long posed analytical challenges, particularly amid recent regional upheavals and following Israel's 13 June surprise attack. Contrary to expectations of a meaningful policy shift, Tehran has remained consistent in its regional posture, including its nuclear activities, support for non-state actors, and opposition to Israeli regional ambitions. This study argues that traditional foreign policy analysis (FPA) frameworks inadequately account for the distinctive dynamics of Iranian foreign policy. Instead, it proposes operational code analysis (OCA) as a more effective analytical lens. By examining the cognitive (beliefs), normative (values), and decision-making dimensions of Iran's leadership – specifically through qualitative content analysis of speeches, interviews, and public statements – this research identifies recurrent themes shaping Tehran's strategic outlook. The findings reveal that Iran's foreign policy is neither irrational nor merely opportunistic; rather, it is driven by a coherent combination of metaphysical convictions, moral confrontation, strategic calculation, and ideological commitment. These insights contribute to a more nuanced understanding of Iran's decision-making processes and its consistent defiance of conventional regional expectations.



Bayram Sinkaya

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The Türkiye-Iran Rivalry over the New Syria: Preliminary Outcomes for Middle Eastern Geopolitics

This paper argues that recent developments in Syria have both intensified the Türkiye-Iran bilateral rivalry and positioned their relationship as a driving force in reshaping the regional geopolitical landscape. The two countries have historically maintained a relationship marked by both cooperation and competition, but the protracted Syrian conflict has increasingly strained this balance. In the wake of the Arab Spring, both countries sought regional influence, presenting themselves as models for transformative governance. Their support for opposing sides in Syria's civil war – Türkiye backing the opposition, Iran supporting the Assad regime – deepened their rivalry. Despite this, cooperation was maintained through the Astana Process (2017), which served to manage bilateral tensions and promote limited regional stability. The overthrow of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the rise of a new Türkiye-aligned government fundamentally altered this dynamic. As Türkiye's influence expanded and Iran's diminished, bilateral tensions flared. Iran accused Türkiye of engineering regime change, while Türkiye warned Iran against destabilizing the new order. This escalation signalled a shift not only in their direct relationship but also in the broader regional balance of power. Through a process-tracing approach, this study explores how bilateral competition over Syria has evolved into a key determinant of both bilateral relations and Middle Eastern geopolitics.



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Iran's Deterrence Strategy Post-7 October and the Regional Security Complex in the Gulf

This paper examines Iran's evolving deterrence strategy in the wake of transformative developments following the events of 7 October 2023. It argues that Iran's long-standing model of deterrence-by-denial – anchored in a forward defence strategy and sustained through the Axis of Resistance – has collapsed due to the fragmentation of its regional proxy network. The fall of Syria as a strategic ally, the weakening of Hezbollah, and the repositioning of Iraqi militias have collectively eroded Iran's ability to contain conflict at a distance. Amid unprecedented direct assaults by Israel and the United States, Iran faces a doctrinal inflection point. This study posits that Tehran is transitioning toward deterrence-by-punishment, a posture aimed at imposing disproportionate costs on aggressors through horizontal escalation across the Gulf and threats to regional energy infrastructure. Drawing on the concept of deterrence and Regional Security Complex Theory, the analysis situates Iran's strategic recalibration within a shifting security landscape. By leveraging content analysis of Iranian official discourse and media sources, the paper traces doctrinal adaptation under conditions of systemic disruption. Ultimately, it contends that this strategic shift will reshape the security dynamics of the Gulf, with broader implications for regional stability and the future of Middle Eastern power configurations.



Saeed Khatibzadeh

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Abdelfattah Mady

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