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The Role of Iran and the United States in Escalating or Containing the Middle East Conflict

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex and evolving roles of Iran and the United States in both escalating and containing conflict in the Middle East, with a particular focus on developments between 2024 and early 2026. It argues that the interaction between these two actors is best understood through a dual framework in which strategies of deterrence and containment often produce unintended escalatory outcomes. Drawing on historical context, including the legacy of the 1953 coup and the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the study highlights how enduring mistrust and competing geopolitical interests continue to shape contemporary policy decisions. The analysis explores key instruments of statecraft—military intervention, economic sanctions, diplomatic engagement, and proxy warfare—demonstrating how each contributes simultaneously to stability and instability. Case studies such as the collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and recent U.S.–Iran military confrontations illustrate the fragility of containment mechanisms in a highly volatile regional environment. The paper further evaluates the broader implications of this rivalry for regional security, global energy markets, and international relations. Ultimately, it concludes that sustainable conflict management requires a balanced approach, combining credible deterrence with sustained diplomatic engagement and emphasising multilateral frameworks and strategic restraint as pathways to long-term stability.

Keywords: U.S.–Iran relations, Middle East conflict, Escalation and containment, Proxy warfare, Geopolitical security dynamics

1. INTRODUCTION

The Middle East remains one of the most volatile geopolitical theatres in the contemporary international system, shaped by enduring rivalries, asymmetrical warfare, and great-power competition. Recent military confrontations involving the United States and Iran have marked an unprecedented phase in regional instability, transforming longstanding tensions into what analysts describe as a *broader, multipolar crisis* with direct implications for global peace, security, and economic stability (Eisenstadt, 2026; Reuters, 2026a). This introduction aims to delineate the contours of that heightened volatility, examining how U.S. and Iranian strategies have alternately escalated and, at times, attempted to contain conflict dynamics.

At its core, the role of the United States in the Middle East has oscillated between strategic deterrence and kinetic military engagement. Since early 2026, the U.S. has undertaken significant military operations in the region as part of what it describes as efforts to degrade Iran's military capabilities and prevent nuclear proliferation, yet these operations have also intensified hostilities (Wikipedia, 2026). Scholars argue that such

military postures often produce *paradoxical outcomes*—bolstering deterrence in theory while generating broader cycles of retaliation in practice (Bukhari, 2026).

Conversely, Iran's behaviour reflects a blend of defensive realism and asymmetric strategy, shaped by decades of regional contestation with Western powers and their allies. Tehran's use of proxy networks, missiles, and drones represents a calculated effort to project influence and sustain *strategic depth* against adversaries (Parchizadeh, 2025). Yet these same tactics contribute to deepening insecurity when interpreted by opponents as existential threats, thus feeding the escalation-containment dilemma characteristic of Middle Eastern geopolitics (Bhattarai, 2024).

The 2026 U.S.–Iran confrontation – initiated by coordinated U.S. and Israeli airstrikes – exemplifies how military action designed to contain a perceived threat can rapidly escalate into wider conflict. These strikes, which targeted Iranian military infrastructure and leadership, precipitated a wave of Iranian retaliation across multiple fronts, involving missile and drone attacks throughout the Gulf and Levant regions (Britannica, 2026). The ensuing

spiral has underscored the *fragility of containment strategies* that rely heavily on force rather than diplomacy.

Crucially, the immediate aftermath of this confrontation included disruptions not only to military balances but also to global energy markets, especially following Iranian threats and attacks against critical choke points such as the Strait of Hormuz – a conduit for roughly 20% of the world's seaborne oil supply (Wikipedia, 2026; Reuters, 2026b). The economic spillovers highlight how localised conflict between Iran and the United States cannot be contained within national borders but instead reverberates regionally and globally.

Despite the prevalence of military escalation, there remain persistent yet underexamined efforts toward conflict containment. Diplomatic channels, including nuclear negotiations and Gulf-led mediation strategies, have intermittently slowed hostilities even when they have failed to resolve deeper security dilemmas (Al-Jaber, 2026). Such approaches demonstrate that containment does not only occur through coercion or force but also through *strategic restraint and multilateral mediation*.

Moreover, the United States' reliance on sanctions and economic statecraft represents another dimension of its containment toolkit. Sanctions regimes — such as those targeting Iran's nuclear programme — have historically aimed to compel policy changes without resorting to open warfare, though their effectiveness remains contested (Nephew, 2017). The interplay between coercive diplomacy and military pressure illustrates the complexity of containment in the modern era, where economic instruments intertwine with strategic signalling.

Iran's own strategic calculus reflects a similar duality between deterrence and engagement. While Tehran continues to insist on its right to sovereign defence and regional influence, its expansive regional network — often characterised as the *Axis of Resistance* — has adapted to both offensive and defensive imperatives (Parchizadeh, 2025). This network's evolution contributes to a security environment in which containment requires nuanced understanding of localised power structures, not merely top-down international prescriptions.

Interpretations of these dynamics vary across scholarly and policy communities. Some argue that conflict escalation is principally driven by misaligned threat perceptions and structural distrust between Tehran and Washington (Eisenstadt, 2026; Bukhari, 2026). Others emphasise systemic constraints, such as regional alliances and energy interdependence, that both enable and limit the scope of direct confrontation (Carnegie Endowment, 2026; Chatham House, 2026).

Another analytical strand highlights the influence of proxy conflicts — such as those involving Iran-backed militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen — in amplifying the confrontation beyond state-to-state interactions (Bhattarai, 2024). These proxy dynamics complicate efforts to contain conflict, as localised actions frequently trigger broader strategic consequences, reinforcing cycles of retaliation and counter-retaliation.

Finally, the current crisis illustrates the *normative and legal challenges* inherent in 21st-century conflict escalation. Debates over the legality of targeted strikes, the protection of civilian infrastructure, and the role of international law in mediating great-power interactions have intensified in light of recent strikes and retaliation (ResearchGate, 2026). These debates underscore that escalation and containment are as much normative issues as they are strategic or military ones.

In sum, the role of Iran and the United States in the Middle East conflict encompasses a complex interplay of military force, diplomatic engagement, sanctions, and proxy networks. The patterns of escalation witnessed since early 2026 reflect not only the immediate consequences of strategic decisions but also long-standing structural conditions of mistrust and competition. Understanding how these factors interact is essential for any comprehensive analysis of escalation and containment in this region.

1.1 Background to the Study

The Middle East has historically been a locus of intricate and overlapping conflict dynamics, where the interactions between state and non-state actors frequently generate both localised violence and broader regional instability (Sk, 2025). These dynamics are shaped by deep-rooted geopolitical tensions, including territorial disputes, sectarian rivalries, and competition over strategic resources such as oil and water (Wilson Center, 2024). Interstate wars, shifting alliances, and the involvement of external powers have recurrently intensified these conflicts, creating cycles of escalation that are often difficult to contain. In this complex environment, the relationship between the United States and Iran has emerged as a central axis of regional volatility, influencing patterns of conflict not only in bilateral terms but also through its impact on neighbouring states and non-state actors.

The historical trajectory of U.S.–Iran relations provides essential context for understanding current tensions. The 1953 U.S.-backed coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, orchestrated with the aim of safeguarding Western access to Iranian oil and countering perceived Soviet influence, laid the groundwork for enduring distrust between the two nations (Washington Post, 2025; Britannica, 2024). This intervention catalysed long-term antagonism that eventually culminated in the 1979 Islamic Revolution, a watershed moment that transformed Iran from a U.S. ally into a principal adversary in the region. The revolution's aftermath saw Washington formally designating Tehran as a state sponsor of terrorism, while Iran adopted a revolutionary foreign policy framework that sought to challenge U.S. hegemony and extend influence across the Middle East (Otubu et al., 2024). This historical context underscores that current conflicts are not isolated events but rather the product of decades-long structural

tensions, ideological differences, and competing visions of regional order.

Recent developments have accelerated these long-standing rivalries into direct confrontation. In early 2026, coordinated U.S. and Israeli strikes targeted Iranian leadership and strategic military installations, provoking immediate Iranian retaliation through ballistic missile and drone operations across multiple theatres in the region (Wikipedia, 2026). These strikes represent a significant escalation, extending beyond traditional proxy conflicts to direct state-level engagements that risk destabilising the wider Middle East. Iran's response demonstrates the strategic calculus underpinning its military and regional policies, which rely not only on direct defence but also on leveraging established proxy networks, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and various militias across Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (Samad & Naz, 2025). These networks function both as tools of influence and as instruments of deterrence, creating a security environment where escalation can propagate quickly across borders.

The consequences of these escalations extend well beyond immediate military outcomes, impacting regional stability, global economic flows, and international security frameworks. The Gulf, in particular, has experienced critical infrastructure damage and threats to vital maritime routes, including the Strait of Hormuz, through which a significant portion of the world's oil supply transits (Wikipedia, 2026; Reuters, 2026). Disruptions to these channels have immediate ramifications for energy markets and global trade, amplifying the international dimensions of what might otherwise appear as localised conflict. Furthermore, the interplay between direct confrontation and ongoing proxy engagements illustrates the inherent difficulty in achieving containment, as military actions often provoke reciprocal measures that escalate tensions further, perpetuating a cycle of conflict that requires nuanced analysis to understand fully (Samad & Naz, 2025; Reuters, 2026).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the extensive body of scholarship examining the historical trajectory of United States–Iran relations and the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, contemporary policy developments have raised new and urgent questions about the complex interplay between escalation and containment in regional conflicts. Traditional analyses have often emphasised ideological rivalry, security dilemmas, and the legacy of past confrontations as the primary drivers of hostility between the two states. However, recent developments suggest that the strategic interaction between Washington and Tehran has evolved into a more dynamic and multifaceted competition involving military posturing, economic coercion, diplomatic manoeuvring, and technological innovation. These evolving dynamics have significantly altered the structure of regional conflict, making it increasingly difficult to distinguish between strategies designed to deter aggression and those that unintentionally intensify hostilities.

In particular, U.S. strategic decisions in the Middle East have oscillated between coercive containment and direct military engagement as mechanisms for managing Iranian influence. Policies such as extensive economic sanctions, military deployments in the Gulf region, and targeted strikes against Iranian-linked facilities have been justified by US policymakers as necessary measures to deter nuclear proliferation and limit Tehran's capacity to destabilise neighbouring states. Nevertheless, while these strategies are often framed as defensive or preventive in nature, critics argue that they may simultaneously contribute to escalating tensions by reinforcing Iran's perception of encirclement and external threat (Otubu et al., 2024; Wikipedia, 2026). As a result, containment efforts that rely heavily on military pressure and economic isolation can inadvertently provoke countermeasures that deepen regional insecurity rather than reduce it.

From Iran's perspective, strategic responses to U.S. pressure have taken the form of asymmetric warfare capabilities and the cultivation of extensive regional alliances. Tehran has invested heavily in missile technology, drone warfare, and the development of proxy networks across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen as part of a broader effort to establish strategic depth and deterrence against potential attacks. These measures are frequently framed by Iranian officials as defensive strategies aimed at preserving national sovereignty and resisting foreign intervention. However, the deployment of such capabilities—particularly the use of missiles, drones, and allied militia groups—has often heightened tensions across multiple theatres, increasing the likelihood of miscalculation and retaliatory escalation (Samad & Naz, 2025; Reuters, 2026). Consequently, actions intended to strengthen deterrence may simultaneously contribute to the proliferation of conflict dynamics across the region.

Despite growing scholarly attention to U.S.–Iran rivalry, there remains a significant gap in research concerning how recent policy decisions by both actors have simultaneously produced outcomes of escalation and containment. Much of the existing literature focuses on either historical developments or single policy instruments—such as sanctions or military intervention—without sufficiently examining how multiple strategies interact within a rapidly changing security environment. This gap has become particularly evident in the context of modern warfare, where technological advancements, including precision missile systems, cyber operations, and unmanned aerial vehicles, have transformed the nature of strategic competition. Moreover, the interconnectedness of global energy markets and international trade networks means that regional conflicts now generate far-reaching economic and political consequences beyond the Middle East itself. Addressing this research gap is therefore essential for understanding how contemporary strategies employed by the United

States and Iran influence patterns of escalation and containment in one of the world's most strategically significant regions.

1.3 Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are to:
1. Critically examine the roles of the United States, Iran, and Israel in both escalating and containing conflict in the Middle East.
2. Evaluate the mechanisms—military, diplomatic, economic, and proxy engagements—used by these actors in pursuing their strategic interests in the region.
3. Analyse the consequences of recent shifts in the strategies and interactions among the United States, Iran, and Israel for regional security and global stability.

1.4 Research Questions

This study seeks to answer the following questions:
1. In what ways have the actions and policies of the United States, Iran, and Israel contributed to escalating or containing conflict in the Middle East?
2. How have recent military engagements, alliances, and diplomatic strategies involving the United States, Iran, and Israel shaped the trajectory of regional tensions?
3. What are the broader implications of the interactions among these actors for Middle Eastern security frameworks and global international relations?

1.5 Significance of the Study

Understanding the dynamics of the roles played by the United States and Iran in the contemporary Middle East conflict is critically important for foreign policy analysis, strategic security planning, and the broader theoretical development of international relations. The rivalry between these two states represents one of the most influential drivers of regional instability, shaping military alliances, security calculations, and diplomatic engagements across the Middle East. As both countries continue to pursue policies aimed at protecting their strategic interests, their actions inevitably influence the trajectory of conflict escalation or containment within the region. Examining these dynamics provides valuable insights into how major powers employ military force, economic pressure, and diplomatic initiatives to achieve strategic objectives while attempting to manage the risks associated with direct confrontation.

Furthermore, the findings of this study can provide policymakers with a clearer understanding of the consequences of different strategic approaches to conflict management. In a region characterised by overlapping security threats, ideological competition, and fragile political institutions, poorly calibrated policies can easily intensify tensions and trigger unintended escalation. By critically assessing the roles played by both the United States and Iran in recent developments, this research offers analytical frameworks that may assist decision-makers in evaluating the effectiveness of deterrence strategies, sanctions regimes, and diplomatic negotiations in reducing conflict intensity. Such insights are particularly relevant in light of evolving security challenges, including the proliferation of advanced missile technologies, drone warfare, and cyber capabilities that have transformed the nature of modern conflict.

In addition to its policy relevance, this study also contributes to ongoing scholarly debates within the field of international relations regarding the effectiveness of various mechanisms for managing interstate rivalry and regional instability. The case of U.S.–Iran relations provides a valuable empirical context for examining broader theoretical questions related to power competition, security dilemmas, and conflict escalation. By analysing how strategies such as military intervention, economic sanctions, proxy engagement, and diplomatic dialogue interact within a volatile geopolitical environment, the research enhances academic understanding of the conditions under which escalation occurs and the circumstances in which containment strategies may succeed. Consequently, this study not only advances knowledge about Middle Eastern security dynamics but also contributes to the development of more nuanced approaches to conflict management in complex international systems.
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1.6 Scope and Limitations

This research focuses primarily on the period from 2024 to early 2026, encompassing the transition from proxy-driven tensions to direct military confrontations involving the United States, Iran, and regional allies. While it draws on historical context where necessary, the study is limited to documented interactions and publicly available data, which may not fully capture classified strategic deliberations or internal decision-making processes within the involved states.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT: U.S.–IRAN RELATIONS AND THE MIDDLE EAST

2.1 Pre-1979 Relations and the Shah

Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran and the United States maintained a close strategic partnership rooted in Cold War geopolitics and mutual economic interests. Under the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran became one of Washington's most important allies in the Middle East, serving as a key pillar of U.S. regional security strategy aimed at containing Soviet influence. The United States provided extensive military assistance, economic aid, and political support to the Shah's regime, viewing Iran as a stabilising force in a region marked by ideological rivalries and emerging nationalist movements (Gasiorowski, 1991). This strategic alliance was further reinforced through Iran's participation in Western-aligned security arrangements

and its role as a major supplier of oil to global markets, which strengthened economic interdependence between the two countries.

However, the foundation of this alliance was significantly shaped by the controversial 1953 coup d'état that removed Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh from power. Mossadegh had attempted to nationalise Iran's oil industry, challenging the dominance of Western oil companies and prompting intervention by U.S. and British intelligence services to restore the Shah's authority (Kinzer, 2003). While the coup secured Western economic interests and consolidated the Shah's rule, it also fostered deep resentment among many Iranians who viewed the intervention as a violation of national sovereignty. Over time, this perception contributed to growing anti-American sentiment within Iranian society, particularly among religious leaders, political activists, and nationalist groups. Scholars argue that the legacy of the 1953 intervention played a crucial role in shaping the ideological hostility that later characterised the Islamic Republic's foreign policy toward the United States (Abrahamian, 2008).

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Shah's government pursued ambitious modernisation programmes supported by U.S. economic and military assistance. Initiatives such as the "White Revolution" aimed to transform Iran into a modern industrial state while consolidating the Shah's authority. Nevertheless, these reforms were accompanied by political repression, economic inequality, and the expansion of the secret police organisation SAVAK, which suppressed opposition movements (Axworthy, 2013). As dissatisfaction with the monarchy intensified, many critics increasingly associated the Shah's authoritarian rule with U.S. backing, thereby linking domestic grievances to broader anti-Western sentiment. Consequently, the close alliance between Washington and Tehran during this period laid the groundwork for the antagonistic relationship that emerged after the revolution.

2.2 The 1979 Revolution and Its Aftermath

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 marked a dramatic turning point in U.S.–Iran relations, transforming a long-standing strategic partnership into one of the most enduring rivalries in modern international politics. The revolution led to the overthrow of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose ideology emphasised resistance to Western influence and the promotion of Islamic governance (Axworthy, 2013). The new government rapidly reoriented Iran's foreign policy away from alignment with the United States and toward a more confrontational stance that challenged American influence across the Middle East.

Relations between the two countries deteriorated further during the Iran hostage crisis, when Iranian revolutionary students seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran in November 1979 and held American diplomats hostage for 444 days. The crisis not only severed formal diplomatic relations between Washington and Tehran but also entrenched mutual hostility that continues to shape bilateral interactions decades later (Abrahamian, 2008). In response, the United States imposed economic sanctions and adopted policies designed to isolate the Islamic Republic politically and economically. These measures reinforced Iran's perception of the United States as a hostile power seeking to undermine its sovereignty, thereby deepening ideological and strategic divisions between the two nations.

The aftermath of the revolution also saw the emergence of a revolutionary foreign policy doctrine in Iran that emphasised resistance to perceived Western domination and support for movements opposed by U.S. allies in the region. This ideological framework, often framed around the concept of resisting "global arrogance", positioned Iran as a challenger to the regional order supported by the United States and its partners. Consequently, the revolution fundamentally reshaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, introducing a persistent rivalry that has influenced numerous conflicts across the region.

2.3 Iran–Iraq War and U.S. Policies

The outbreak of the Iran–Iraq War in 1980 further complicated U.S.–Iran relations and had lasting implications for regional security dynamics. The war started when Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in order to take advantage of the political chaos that followed the Iranian Revolution and to show that Iraq was the most powerful country in the region. The war quickly evolved into one of the longest and most destructive interstate conflicts of the twentieth century, lasting eight years and causing significant human and economic losses for both countries (Hiro, 1991).

During the conflict, the United States adopted policies that generally favoured Iraq, despite maintaining official neutrality. Washington provided intelligence support, economic assistance, and indirect military aid to Baghdad, viewing Iraq as a counterbalance to the revolutionary influence of Iran (Karsh, 2002). At the same time, the U.S. sought to protect strategic interests in the Persian Gulf, including the security of oil shipping routes and the stability of allied Gulf monarchies. These policies were perceived by Iran as evidence of U.S. hostility and reinforced Tehran's belief that Western powers sought to contain and weaken the Islamic Republic.

The legacy of the Iran–Iraq War significantly influenced Iran's security doctrine and regional strategy. Having experienced international isolation during the conflict, Iranian leaders concluded that strengthening deterrence capabilities and cultivating regional allies were essential for national security. This experience contributed to the development of Iran's asymmetric military strategies and its emphasis on building networks

of allied groups across the Middle East, which later became central components of its regional policy.

2.4 Rise of Proxy Networks and Regional Entrenchment

Following the Iran–Iraq War, Iran increasingly relied on proxy networks to expand its regional influence and counter perceived threats from the United States and its allies. One of the most prominent examples of this strategy is Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon, a militant and political organisation that emerged during the Lebanese civil war in the early 1980s. Hezbollah has since become a powerful actor in Lebanese politics and a key component of Iran's regional strategy, providing Tehran with a means of projecting influence beyond its borders (Norton, 2007).

Over time, Iran expanded its network of allied groups across the Middle East, including militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. These alliances are often described collectively as part of the "Axis of Resistance,", a loose coalition of actors that share opposition to U.S. influence and Israeli policies in the region (Byman, 2005). Through financial assistance, military training, and political support, Iran has cultivated relationships with these groups as a means of establishing strategic depth and deterring potential adversaries.

The development of these proxy networks has significantly shaped the security environment of the Middle East. While they provide Iran with tools for indirect confrontation, they also contribute to the proliferation of conflicts and complicate efforts to achieve regional stability, leading to increased violence and instability in countries like Syria and Iraq. Critics argue that such strategies intensify sectarian divisions and prolong conflicts by empowering armed non-state actors, while Iranian officials often frame these alliances as legitimate forms of resistance against foreign intervention.

2.5 The Nuclear Program, Sanctions, and Diplomacy

Iran's nuclear programme has become one of the most contentious issues in U.S.–Iran relations and a focal point of international diplomacy in the twenty-first century. Western governments, particularly the United States, have expressed concerns that Iran's nuclear activities could enable the development of nuclear weapons, although Iran maintains that its programme is intended solely for peaceful energy purposes (Fitzpatrick, 2014). In response to these concerns, the United States and its allies imposed extensive economic sanctions aimed at pressuring Tehran to limit its nuclear activities.

These tensions culminated in the negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, an agreement between Iran and major world powers designed to restrict Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief. The agreement was widely regarded as a significant diplomatic achievement that temporarily reduced tensions and created mechanisms for monitoring Iran's nuclear activities (Nephew, 2017). However, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 and the subsequent reimposition of sanctions undermined the framework and reignited tensions between the two countries.

The breakdown of the JCPOA illustrates the complex interplay between sanctions, diplomacy, and military deterrence in managing international conflicts. While sanctions are often intended to be tools for coercive diplomacy aimed at changing state behaviour without resorting to military force, they can also contribute to escalation by deepening economic hardship and reinforcing nationalist resistance. Consequently, the nuclear issue remains a central dimension of the broader strategic rivalry between Iran and the United States, shaping both diplomatic negotiations and regional security calculations.

3. U.S. STRATEGIES AND THEIR EFFECTS

3.1 Security Doctrine and Strategic Goals

The United States' strategic engagement in the Middle East has historically been guided by a combination of security doctrines aimed at protecting vital economic interests, ensuring regional stability, and preventing the emergence of hostile powers capable of dominating the region. Since the end of World War II, American policymakers have considered the Middle East a strategically significant area due to its vast energy resources and its geopolitical position linking Europe, Asia, and Africa (Gause, 2010). Within this strategic framework, the United States has pursued a policy of containment toward Iran, particularly following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which transformed Iran from a key regional ally into one of Washington's principal geopolitical rivals (Parsi, 2017). Containment in this context has involved preventing Iran from expanding its influence across the Middle East while simultaneously safeguarding U.S. allies and maintaining freedom of navigation through critical maritime routes such as the Persian Gulf.

The implementation of this containment strategy has relied heavily on a robust regional military presence. The United States maintains a network of military bases, naval deployments, and logistical facilities across the Gulf region, including in Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates. These installations serve as operational hubs for the U.S. Fifth Fleet and other military units tasked with protecting shipping lanes, deterring aggression, and responding rapidly to emerging security threats (Bacevich, 2016). From a strategic perspective, this military infrastructure enables the United States to project power and reassure its allies, while simultaneously signalling to Iran that attempts to challenge the regional order will encounter substantial resistance.

However, scholars have debated whether such military posturing genuinely contributes to stability or instead exacerbates regional insecurity. Realist analysts argue that a strong U.S. presence deters potential aggression and reduces the likelihood of large-scale interstate conflict. Conversely, critics contend that the continuous deployment of American military forces in the region contributes to a security dilemma, in which Iran interprets U.S. actions as threatening and responds by expanding its own military capabilities and regional alliances (Walt, 2018). As a result, policies intended to contain Iranian influence may inadvertently stimulate counterbalancing behaviour, reinforcing cycles of mistrust and competition.

3.2 Military Interventions and Escalation

In addition to maintaining a permanent military presence, the United States has periodically engaged in direct military interventions aimed at deterring or responding to perceived threats from Iran and its allies. These interventions have ranged from targeted strikes against Iranian-backed militias to broader operations intended to degrade military capabilities or disrupt strategic infrastructure. For example, U.S. military actions against militia groups in Iraq and Syria have often been justified as defensive measures designed to protect American personnel and regional partners (Byman, 2020). However, such interventions frequently trigger retaliatory responses, thereby increasing the risk of broader escalation.

Recent developments illustrate the persistent volatility associated with these military strategies. In 2026, U.S. forces participated in coordinated strikes targeting Iranian military infrastructure and leadership figures, actions that were justified as part of a broader effort to counter Iran's expanding missile and drone capabilities. These strikes were followed by Iranian retaliatory operations involving missile launches and drone attacks against regional targets, demonstrating how quickly localised confrontations can evolve into wider regional crises (Reuters, 2026). The pattern reflects a recurring feature of U.S.–Iran interactions: attempts to deter adversaries through force often provoke countermeasures that intensify tensions rather than reduce them.

From a strategic perspective, military interventions serve both deterrent and coercive functions within U.S. policy. Proponents argue that demonstrating willingness to use force reinforces credibility and discourages adversaries from engaging in aggressive actions. However, critics note that repeated reliance on military tools can undermine diplomatic solutions and entrench adversarial perceptions, thereby making conflict resolution more difficult over time (Mearsheimer, 2014). Consequently, the impact of military interventions on regional stability remains deeply contested within scholarly and policy debates.

3.3 Sanctions, Diplomacy, and Regime Pressure

Beyond military instruments, the United States has extensively relied on economic sanctions and diplomatic pressure as tools for influencing Iranian behaviour. Sanctions have targeted a wide range of sectors within the Iranian economy, including banking, energy exports, and industrial production, with the objective of compelling Tehran to alter policies related to nuclear development, missile programmes, and regional interventions (Nephew, 2017). By restricting Iran's access to international financial systems and limiting foreign investment, U.S. policymakers have sought to increase the economic costs associated with Iran's strategic activities.

Sanctions have produced mixed results. On one hand, they have significantly constrained Iran's economic growth and contributed to domestic economic pressures that have occasionally encouraged Iranian leaders to engage in negotiations with international actors. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which temporarily limited Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief, illustrates how economic pressure can facilitate diplomatic breakthroughs (Parsi, 2017). On the other hand, sanctions have also reinforced nationalist sentiments within Iran and strengthened hardline factions that oppose compromise with the United States.

Diplomatic engagement has therefore remained a critical but fragile component of U.S. strategy. Efforts to negotiate nuclear limitations, reduce regional tensions, and prevent the proliferation of advanced weapons technologies demonstrate that diplomatic channels can provide mechanisms for conflict containment. However, the withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in 2018 and the subsequent reimposition of sanctions undermined the agreement and contributed to renewed tensions between Washington and Tehran. This episode illustrates the difficulties of maintaining diplomatic agreements in an environment characterised by deep strategic distrust and domestic political pressures in both countries.

3.4 Alliance Structures and Containment Partnerships

A central pillar of U.S. strategy in the Middle East involves maintaining a network of alliances and security partnerships designed to balance Iranian influence and reinforce regional stability. Among the most significant of these relationships is the strategic partnership between the United States and Israel. The United States provides Israel with extensive military assistance, advanced weapons systems, and intelligence cooperation, enabling it to maintain qualitative military superiority in the region (Inbar, 2016). This partnership plays a critical role in deterring potential threats from Iran and its allied groups, particularly those operating in Lebanon and Syria.

In addition to Israel, the United States maintains close security relationships with several Gulf Cooperation

Council (GCC) states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. These partnerships involve arms sales, joint military exercises, and intelligence sharing aimed at countering Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf. By strengthening the defensive capabilities of regional allies, Washington seeks to create a collective security framework that can limit Iran's ability to project power across the region (Gause, 2010).

The United States has also engaged NATO partners and other international actors in regional security initiatives. Multinational naval patrols in the Gulf, counter-terrorism operations, and joint defence planning efforts demonstrate how alliance structures extend beyond bilateral relationships to include broader cooperative arrangements. Nevertheless, critics argue that such alliances can also contribute to regional polarisation, reinforcing bloc-based rivalries that deepen tensions rather than encouraging diplomatic compromise.

3.5 Analysis of Escalation vs. Containment Outcomes

Evaluating the overall impact of U.S. strategies in the Middle East requires a careful analysis of their dual role in both escalating and containing conflict. On one hand, the combination of military deterrence, economic sanctions, and alliance partnerships has helped limit the expansion of Iranian military capabilities and provided security assurances to U.S. allies. These measures have arguably prevented Iran from achieving regional dominance and have contributed to maintaining a balance of power in the Middle East (Walt, 2018).

On the other hand, many of these same policies have simultaneously intensified geopolitical rivalries and contributed to cycles of retaliation between the United States, Iran, and their respective allies. Military interventions and sanctions often provoke countermeasures that increase instability, while alliance structures may deepen sectarian and geopolitical divisions across the region. The resulting environment is characterised by persistent tension in which conflict remains contained at certain moments yet is prone to sudden escalation when crises occur.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of U.S. strategies depends on the delicate balance between deterrence and diplomacy. Policies that rely exclusively on coercive measures risk provoking further confrontation, while strategies that combine credible deterrence with sustained diplomatic engagement may offer greater potential for long-term stability. Understanding this balance is therefore essential for assessing the broader role of the United States in shaping the trajectory of Middle Eastern conflicts and determining whether its actions ultimately contribute to escalation or containment.

4. IRAN'S REGIONAL ROLE AND POLICY DYNAMICS

4.1 Revolutionary Ideology and Security Strategy

Iran's regional behaviour cannot be fully understood without examining the ideological foundations of the Islamic Republic and how these principles shape its national security strategy. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran's political leadership has embraced a revolutionary ideology that emphasises resistance to foreign domination, protection of national sovereignty, and support for movements opposing Western influence in the Middle East. The revolutionary doctrine articulated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini framed the United States as a hegemonic power seeking to dominate regional politics, thereby legitimising policies aimed at countering American influence and supporting anti-Western resistance movements (Abrahamian, 2008). This ideological perspective continues to influence Iran's strategic worldview, shaping its approach to both regional security and international diplomacy.

Iran's security strategy also reflects the country's historical experiences with foreign intervention and perceived encirclement by hostile powers. From Tehran's perspective, the legacy of external interference—including the 1953 coup and Western support for Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War—demonstrates the vulnerability of the Iranian state in an international system dominated by powerful actors (Axworthy, 2013). Consequently, Iranian leaders have adopted a defensive strategic posture centred on deterrence, strategic depth, and asymmetric warfare capabilities. Rather than relying solely on conventional military power, Iran seeks to offset the technological and financial advantages of its adversaries by developing missile programmes, cyber capabilities, and networks of regional allies capable of projecting influence beyond its borders (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007).

Scholars frequently interpret this strategy through the lens of the security dilemma in international relations theory. Actions that Iran views as defensive measures—such as strengthening missile defences or cultivating allied militias—are often interpreted by its adversaries as aggressive expansionism. This dynamic contributes to a cycle of mistrust in which both Iran and its rivals expand their military capabilities in response to perceived threats, thereby intensifying regional instability (Walt, 2018). Understanding the ideological and strategic motivations underlying Iran's behaviour is therefore essential for evaluating its role in either escalating or containing conflicts across the Middle East.

4.2 Proxy Engagements and Influence

One of the most distinctive features of Iran's regional strategy is its extensive use of proxy networks to expand influence and counterbalance the military superiority of its adversaries. Since the 1980s, Iran has developed relationships with a range of armed non-state actors across the Middle East, providing them with financial assistance, training, weapons, and strategic guidance. These alliances enable Tehran to exert influence in

multiple regional conflicts without direct military confrontation, thereby reducing the risks associated with conventional warfare (Byman, 2005).

The most prominent example of this strategy is Iran's longstanding relationship with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Established during the Lebanese civil war in the early 1980s with Iranian support, Hezbollah has evolved into both a powerful political organisation and a formidable military force capable of confronting Israel and shaping Lebanese domestic politics (Norton, 2007). For Iran, Hezbollah represents a critical component of its deterrence strategy, providing a means of projecting power along Israel's northern border and influencing regional security dynamics.

Beyond Lebanon, Iran has cultivated alliances with various militia groups in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In Iraq, Iranian-backed militias have played significant roles in both domestic political processes and military operations against extremist groups. Similarly, Iran's support for the Syrian government during the Syrian civil war—including the deployment of advisers and allied militias—has been instrumental in preserving the Assad regime (Phillips, 2016). In Yemen, Iran has been accused of providing support to the Houthi movement, which has engaged in conflict with Saudi-led coalition forces. Collectively, these networks are often described as part of the "Axis of Resistance," a loosely coordinated alliance of actors opposed to US influence and Israeli policies in the region (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007). While these proxy relationships enhance Iran's strategic depth, they also contribute to the proliferation of armed conflicts and complicate efforts to achieve regional stability.

4.3 Responses to U.S. Pressure

Iran's responses to U.S. pressure have evolved, reflecting both strategic adaptation and domestic political considerations. Economic sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies have placed significant strain on the Iranian economy, restricting access to international financial systems and limiting the country's ability to export oil. In response, Iranian policymakers have pursued a combination of economic resilience strategies and diplomatic engagement to mitigate the impact of these measures (Nephew, 2017).

One key element of Iran's strategy has been the development of alternative economic partnerships with countries outside the Western alliance system. By strengthening trade and investment ties with nations such as China and Russia, Iran has sought to reduce its dependence on Western markets and circumvent sanctions regimes. This approach reflects a broader effort to diversify economic relationships and maintain access to global markets despite ongoing restrictions.

At the same time, Iran has periodically engaged in diplomatic negotiations aimed at reducing tensions and securing sanctions relief. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) represented a major diplomatic breakthrough, establishing limits on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for lifting certain international sanctions (Parsi, 2017). However, the subsequent withdrawal of the United States from the agreement and the reimposition of sanctions reignited tensions and reinforced Iranian scepticism regarding the reliability of diplomatic commitments. As a result, Iran's responses to U.S. pressure often combine resistance and negotiation, reflecting a strategy designed to preserve national sovereignty while maintaining the possibility of diplomatic compromise.

4.4 Direct Military Actions and Escalatory Moves

Although Iran often relies on indirect strategies such as proxy warfare, it has also engaged in direct military actions that have heightened tensions in the region. Over the past decade, Iran has significantly expanded its missile and drone capabilities, viewing these technologies as essential components of its deterrence strategy. These weapons systems enable Iran to threaten adversaries at long distances while compensating for the relative limitations of its conventional air force and navy (Eisenstadt, 2019).

Recent developments have demonstrated the growing role of these capabilities in Iran's strategic calculations. Iranian missile and drone operations targeting regional adversaries have been interpreted by some analysts as signals of deterrence designed to discourage military attacks against Iranian territory or interests. At the same time, such actions risk provoking retaliatory responses that escalate tensions across the region. The strategic importance of the Persian Gulf further amplifies these risks, as threats to maritime routes—particularly the Strait of Hormuz—have the potential to disrupt global energy markets and trigger international crises (Gause, 2010).

These developments highlight the dual nature of Iran's military actions. While Tehran often frames its missile and drone programs as defensive measures intended to deter aggression, their deployment in regional conflicts can be perceived by rival states as provocative. Consequently, the expansion of these capabilities contributes to an increasingly volatile security environment in which miscalculation or unintended escalation remains a persistent concern.

4.5 Iran's Strategy of Endurance and Energy Leverage

A central element of Iran's long-term strategy is its emphasis on endurance and resilience in the face of sustained external pressure. Iranian leaders often use their country's ability to deal with economic sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military threats as proof of its strength and commitment to its ideology. This narrative of resistance has become an integral component of Iran's

domestic political discourse, reinforcing public support for policies aimed at confronting perceived external adversaries (Axworthy, 2013).

Iran's geopolitical position and energy resources also provide significant leverage in its strategic calculations. As one of the world's largest producers of oil and natural gas, Iran occupies a critical position within global energy markets. Control over strategic maritime chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz enables Tehran to threaten disruptions to international energy supplies during periods of heightened tension. While Iran rarely seeks to completely block these routes, the possibility of such disruptions serves as a powerful bargaining tool in geopolitical negotiations (Gause, 2010).

Ultimately, Iran's regional strategy reflects a combination of ideological conviction, asymmetric military capabilities, and strategic patience. By emphasising endurance and leveraging its geopolitical advantages, Iran seeks to outlast external pressure and maintain its influence in the Middle East. However, this approach also perpetuates cycles of confrontation with the United States and its allies, ensuring that the region remains a focal point of geopolitical competition.

5. ESCALATION, CONTAINMENT, AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

5.1 What Constitutes Escalation and Containment?

Understanding the dynamics of escalation and containment in the Middle East requires a conceptual framework grounded in international relations theory. Escalation usually means that conflicts get worse in terms of size, scope, or severity. This can happen when new military capabilities are added, the conflict spreads to new areas, or more people get involved. In contrast, containment refers to strategies designed to limit the expansion of conflict, prevent adversaries from increasing their influence, and maintain a stable balance of power without necessarily resolving the underlying disputes (Walt, 2018). Within the context of U.S.–Iran relations, both escalation and containment frequently occur simultaneously, as policies intended to deter adversaries can inadvertently provoke retaliatory responses, leading to a cycle of tension that complicates diplomatic efforts and regional stability.

The concept of containment in U.S. foreign policy has historically been associated with Cold War strategies designed to limit Soviet expansion. However, scholars argue that similar approaches have been applied to Iran, particularly after the 1979 revolution transformed Tehran into a central challenger to U.S. regional influence (Parsi, 2017). Military deterrence, economic sanctions, and building alliances are all parts of containment strategies that are meant to limit Iran's ability to project power across the Middle East. At the same time, escalation may occur when these policies trigger countermeasures by Iran, including the development of missile capabilities, expansion of proxy networks, or direct military retaliation.

From a theoretical perspective, these dynamics reflect the broader "security dilemma" described in realist international relations theory. According to this framework, actions taken by one state to enhance its security; such as military buildup or strategic alliances; may be interpreted by rival states as threatening, prompting them to adopt similar measures in response (Mearsheimer, 2014). In the Middle East, the interaction between U.S. containment strategies and Iran's defensive responses illustrates how security dilemmas can transform deterrence into cycles of escalation, complicating efforts to achieve long-term stability.

5.2 Case Studies of Escalation

Several historical and contemporary cases illustrate how policies pursued by both the United States and Iran have contributed to the escalation of regional tensions. One prominent example occurred during the early 2000s when the U.S. invasion of Iraq dramatically altered the balance of power in the Middle East. Although the intervention was primarily directed at removing Saddam Hussein's regime, the collapse of the Iraqi state created opportunities for Iran to expand its influence through political alliances and militia networks (Gause, 2010). The resulting competition between U.S. forces and Iranian-backed groups contributed to prolonged instability and violence within Iraq.

Another significant escalation occurred following the United States' withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. The reimposition of sanctions under the "maximum pressure" campaign intensified economic hardship within Iran and heightened tensions between Washington and Tehran. In response, Iran gradually reduced its compliance with nuclear restrictions and increased regional military activities, including missile testing and support for allied militias (Nephew, 2017). These actions demonstrated how economic pressure intended to compel policy change could instead provoke retaliatory escalation.

More recent confrontations have further illustrated the fragile nature of deterrence in the region. Targeted military strikes, retaliatory missile attacks, and naval incidents in the Persian Gulf have periodically brought the United States and Iran to the brink of direct conflict. These episodes underscore the difficulty of managing escalation in an environment characterised by mutual distrust, competing alliances, and the presence of multiple non-state actors capable of triggering broader crises.

5.3 Case Studies of Containment

Despite recurring escalation, there have also been notable instances where diplomatic efforts and multilateral negotiations succeeded in temporarily containing tensions between the United States and Iran. The most prominent example is the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), negotiated in 2015 between Iran

and a coalition of major world powers including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany. The agreement imposed strict limitations on Iran's nuclear programme while establishing an international monitoring regime in exchange for sanctions relief (Parsi, 2017).

The JCPOA represented a significant achievement for diplomatic containment because it demonstrated the potential for negotiated agreements to reduce the risk of nuclear proliferation and prevent military confrontation. Through sustained negotiations and multilateral cooperation, the agreement created mechanisms for transparency and confidence-building that temporarily eased tensions between Iran and the international community. However, the agreement's collapse following the U.S. withdrawal revealed the fragility of diplomatic containment in the absence of sustained political commitment from all parties involved.

Other examples of containment include regional ceasefire agreements and back-channel negotiations aimed at preventing broader war. Informal diplomatic contacts, often facilitated by intermediary states or international organisations, have occasionally helped deescalate crises by providing communication channels during periods of heightened tension. Although these measures rarely resolve underlying geopolitical rivalries, they demonstrate the importance of diplomacy in preventing localised conflicts from escalating into wider regional wars.

5.4 Regional and Global Implications

The rivalry between the United States and Iran has far-reaching implications not only for the Middle East but also for the broader international system. One of the most significant consequences of this rivalry is its impact on global energy markets. The Persian Gulf is still one of the most important energy corridors in the world. Problems with shipping routes like the Strait of Hormuz can quickly affect the price of oil and the stability of the economy around the world (Gause, 2010). As a result, tensions in the region often produce ripple effects that extend far beyond the immediate area of conflict.

In addition to economic consequences, U.S.–Iran tensions influence the structure of regional security alliances. The United States has strengthened partnerships with Israel and several Gulf states in response to perceived Iranian expansion, while Iran has developed networks of allied groups and strategic partnerships with countries such as Russia and China. These evolving alignments contribute to the formation of competing geopolitical blocs within the region, increasing the complexity of diplomatic negotiations and raising the risk of broader geopolitical competition (Walt, 2018).

Furthermore, the rivalry between Washington and Tehran intersects with broader shifts in the global balance of power. As emerging powers expand their influence in the Middle East, regional conflicts increasingly reflect the interaction between local disputes and global strategic competition. This dynamic complicates efforts to contain conflicts because the involvement of multiple major powers introduces additional interests and agendas into already volatile situations.

5.5 Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that the roles played by the United States and Iran in the conflict in the Middle East are characterised by a complex interplay between escalation and containment. U.S. policies emphasising military deterrence, economic sanctions, and alliance-building have successfully constrained certain aspects of Iranian influence but have also contributed to cycles of retaliation that intensify regional tensions. Similarly, Iran's strategies of asymmetric warfare, proxy engagement, and strategic resilience have enabled it to resist external pressure while simultaneously amplifying instability in several regional conflicts.

Moving forward, a more sustainable approach to regional stability will likely require a combination of credible deterrence and renewed diplomatic engagement. While military capabilities remain essential for preventing aggression, excessive reliance on coercive measures risks reinforcing the security dilemma that fuels escalation. Diplomatic frameworks that incorporate regional actors, address security concerns on all sides, and establish mechanisms for crisis communication could provide more effective pathways toward conflict containment.

Ultimately, the future trajectory of US–Iran relations will depend on the ability of both states—and the broader international community—to balance competition with cooperation. Policies that emphasise dialogue, economic engagement, and multilateral conflict management may offer the most promising prospects for reducing tensions and promoting long-term stability in the Middle East.

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