FROM ALLIANCE TO ANIMOSITY: HISTORICISING THE ISRAEL-IRAN RELATIONS, 1948-2022

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical evolution of Israel-Iran relations, focusing on the transition from a covert strategic alliance (1948-1979) to protracted ideological and geopolitical rivalry (1979-2022). Initially united by shared interests in countering Arab nationalism and Soviet expansion, Israel and Iran engaged in discreet cooperation despite lacking formal diplomatic ties. However, the 1979 Iranian Revolution redefined Iran's foreign policy identity, positioning Israel as a central adversary within a broader anti-imperialist and Islamic resistance framework. The research, therefore, addresses the central research problem of how and why the bilateral relationship shifted from cooperation to hostility, exploring the role of regime change, ideology, strategic concerns, and regional dynamics. Employing a qualitative historical-analytical approach, the study draws heavily on academic literature and online news sources, interpreted through a hybrid realist-constructivist theoretical framework. The findings reveal that the Israel-Iran relations have been shaped by the interplay of strategic pragmatism and ideological enmity, manifesting in covert cooperation, proxy conflicts, asymmetric warfare, nuclear tensions, and regional realignments such as the Abraham Accords. While ideology became central after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, pragmatic calculations periodically moderated hostilities, producing a complex mix of confrontation and restraint. The study concludes that understanding this rivalry requires integrating both realist and constructivist perspectives and highlights the importance of historical context, identity, and strategic imperatives in shaping enduring interstate conflicts.

***Keywords*:** Ideological Conflict; Iran-Israel relations; Islamic Revolution; Middle East Geopolitics; strategic rivalry

Introduction

For much of the twentieth century since Iran extended recognition to the state of Israel in 1948, the first to do so among the Middle Eastern Arab countries, Iran and Israel shared a strategic alliance rooted in geopolitical pragmatism. The Pahlavi regime in Iran and the nascent Israeli state found common ground in their shared concerns about Arab nationalism, Soviet influence, and regional isolation. However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a dramatic rupture in this alignment, transforming Iran from a tacit ally of Israel into one of its most vocal adversaries. In the post-1979 period up to the present, the Iran-Israel relationship had been characterised by deep-seated hostility, proxy

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confrontations, and rhetorical animosity, reshaping the broader strategic architecture of the Middle East.

This dramatic transformation from alliance to animosity raised significant questions about the drivers of foreign policy change and the enduring role of ideology, identity, and security in shaping interstate relations. While realist paradigms often emphasised material interests and balance-of-power calculations, the Iran-Israeli rivalry suggested a more complex interplay between strategic rationality and ideological commitment. Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy, grounded in an Islamic revolutionary ethos, had positioned Israel as both a moral antagonist and a geopolitical threat. Conversely, Israel considered Iran's regional ambitions and nuclear programme as existential dangers, prompting an aggressive counter-strategy of deterrence, intelligence operations, and diplomatic isolation (Kaye, 2010; Litvak, 2009).

Scholarly interest in the Iran-Israel relationship has increased in recent years, particularly in light of regional developments such as the Syrian civil war, the rise of Hezbollah, and Iran's contested nuclear programme. Yet much of the literature tends to focus on contemporary security concerns without adequately historicising the evolution of this rivalry. A deeper historical inquiry is necessary to understand not only the rupture that followed the 1979 revolution but also the preceding decades of strategic cooperation, mutual interests, and diplomatic engagement. By situating the current animosity within its historical contexts, this study seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how and why the relationship changed—and what this tells us about the nature of international rivalries.

This paper argues that the Iran-Israel relationship has transitioned through three major phases: pragmatic alliance (1948–1979), revolutionary rupture (1979–1990s), and regional confrontation (1990s–present). Each phase has been shaped by a combination of internal political changes, external geopolitical pressures, and evolving ideological discourses. The study draws upon primary documents, declassified intelligence reports, speeches, and academic analyses to trace this trajectory and assess its broader implications. The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the bilateral context. The Iran-Israeli rivalry has become a central axis in Middle Eastern geopolitics, influencing alignments, fuelling proxy wars, and complicating global diplomatic efforts—particularly concerning nuclear non-proliferation and regional stability (Mabon, 2020). Understanding the historical roots of this rivalry is thus essential for policymakers, scholars, and international actors seeking to navigate the complexities of Middle Eastern diplomacy.

The structure of this paper is as follows: succeeding this introduction, the research problem and key questions are outlined. The literature review surveys existing academic work on the subject, highlighting major debates and gaps. The methodology section explains the historical-analytical approach used in this study. The results/findings section presents the key moments and turning points in the Iran-Israel relationship. The discussion contextualises these findings within theoretical frameworks and contemporary developments, while the conclusion synthesises the paper's insights and outlines directions for future research.

Research Problem/Questions

The central problem that this article addresses is the historical shift in Iran-Israel relations from a strategic alignment to an adversarial hostility. Even with increasing scholarly interest in Middle Eastern geopolitics, there still persists a gap in historical analyses that trace the nuanced trajectory of this rivalry through the course of varied political periods. Much of the existing research considers contemporary security issues, particularly Iran's nuclear ambitions and cyber operations of Israel, without digging deeper into how previous alliances and ideological shifts have indeed shaped current tension. This has thrown modern analyses into proliferating ambiguities—largely overlooking those foundational changes upon which this present adversarial interplay stands.

Therefore, this study is guided by questions such as:

1. How and under what conditions was the strategic alliance between Iran and Israel maintained before the 1979 Iranian Revolution?

2. What were the principal political, ideological, and strategic forces that fractured the Iran-Israel relations after 1979?

3. What had been the expression of the post-revolutionary rivalry between Iran and Israel throughout its stages, and what were its historical continuities or discontinuities in this transformation?

These questions are intended to help in tracing the rivalry and provide a deeper understanding of the complex forces—both internal and external—that have shaped the evolution of one of the Middle East's most consequential bilateral relations.

Literature Review

The Iran-Israeli relations has, indeed, attracted much scholarly attention, particularly within the framework of broader Middle East geopolitics, nuclear proliferation, and ideological conflicts. However, the literature has been divided between two categories of temporal emphasis: those studies that emphasise the pre-1979 strategic alliance and those that emphasise post-revolutionary hostility. This dichotomy did not allow scholars adequately to investigate the development of the rivalry from a historically continuous and analytically integrated angle. This review hopes to situate the present study within these competing intellectual debates while concurrently indicating thematic and methodological gaps that this paper hopes to address.

Studies that focused on the pre-1979 period have generally emphasised the pragmatic nature of Iran-Israel relations. Scholars such as Parsi (2007) and Elm (1994) attest to the two states finding common cause *vis-a-vis* security issues, especially in relation to Arab nationalism, Soviet expansionism, and regional isolation. Iran was supplying most of the energy needs of Israel, while Israeli intelligence agencies reportedly provided support to Iran's internal security apparatus through covert collaboration. Parsi (2007) highlights

what he calls a "periphery doctrine" pursued by Israel, an attempt to counter Arab hostility by forming an alliance with non-Arab states. Iran under the *Shah* thus became the mainstay of this foreign policy thrust. Meanwhile, Elm (1994), whilst agreeing to the general position of the existence of a strong strategic relationship, analyses the relationship with a more state-centric perspective where Realpolitik dictated both sides' means of action, albeit without formal recognition by Iran. They concur that while this relationship was hardly ever spoken of with pride, it was nevertheless very close strategically and therefore mutually beneficial.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran required the reshaping of Iran's foreign policy framework. The new regime, driven by revolutionary *Shia* ideology, and anti-imperialist fervour, considered Israel an illegitimate colonial entity. This ideological turn has been treated with an extensive literature, with authors such as Litvak (2009), Takeyh (2009), and Buchta (2000) discussing how the foreign policies of Iran post-1979 became strongly marked with religious and ideological symbolism. Litvak (2009) traces the development of revolutionary rhetoric in Iran to portray Israel as not only a political adversary but also an existential and moral opponent. Takeyh (2009) also asserts that in 1979, Iranian foreign policy deliberately rejected its previous pragmatic alliances and replaced them with an ideological vision based on Islamic resistance. For both writers, the rupture with Israel was not just political but symbolic and crucial to Iran's self-identity as a leading force in resistance against Western and Zionist domination.

Simultaneously, Israel began viewing Iran not only as a regional competitor but also as an existential threat, especially with Iran's support for proxy groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Eisenstadt (2001) and Kaye (2010) document the rise of the Israeli containment strategy, which includes intelligence activities, targeted killings, cyber warfare (including notably Stuxnet virus), as well as lobbying efforts against the Iranian nuclear program. Despite the relevance of this studies, many of these post-1979 studies treat the rupture as a sudden and complete break that lacks any continuities or strategic overlaps. Furthermore, few works interrogate how Israel's own ideological shift of security narrative developed simultaneous to Iran's shift or whether past cooperation might have conditioned mutual perceptions especially during hostility.

Iran's nuclear programme emerged in the first decade of the 2000s, adding a new dimension of rivalry. A study by Fitzpatrick (2008) and Meir (2014) have examined how nuclearisation altered the strategic calculations on both sides. Fitzpatrick (2008) posits that the nuclear pursuit has been grounded both on deterrence logic and Iran's revolutionary ambitions. Meir (2014) analyses Israel's doctrine of preventive deterrence by arguing that Iran's nuclear capability would irreversibly upset the strategic balance in the region. These works help in understanding the military and diplomatic escalation between the two states and often treat the nuclearisation as a separate issue, largely disconnected from the leg of strategic rivalry that has grown over time.

Much of that literature remains entrenched either in realist or constructivist paradigms, examining strategic imperatives or ideological constructs. Realist scholars like Walt (1987) interpret the rivalry with reference to threat perception and power balancing; on the contrary, constructivists stress the role of identity and ideology (Barnett, 1998). Both

perspectives substantially contribute to the literature, but not many authors considered combining these frameworks or looked at the historical context spanning the entirety of the relationship. Moreover, there is a paucity when it comes to comparative historical studies tracing the ways by which the foreign policies for both states have evolved through rather over periods. Most works limit themselves to discrete events—the Iranian Revolution, the Lebanon Wars, or the JCPOA—without embedding them in an even greater historical arc. My work therefore aims to bridge this void by utilising the historical-analytical approach that relates past and present, incorporating both ideological and strategic dimensions.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative historical-analytical approach in examining the evolution of Iran-Israel relations from strategic partnership to deep-seated hostility. The approach rests upon historical institutionalism and interpretative political analysis, which stress the importance of temporality, path dependency, and ideational shifts in the constitution of foreign policy behaviour (Thelen 1999; Bevir and Rhodes 2003). This approach, focusing neither on discrete policy episodes nor on material capabilities, also enables a richer interrogation of how ideologies, identities, and strategic cultures interact over time to structure durable patterns of enmity and alliance.

The reasoning for the historical approach is twofold. First, the Iran-Israel relationship has been undergoing multiple evolutionary phases, each characterised by specific constellations of domestic politics, ideological worldviews, and international pressures. To understand these shifts, their very evolution across time must be traced and not tackled piecemeal. Secondly, in doing so, continuing and breaking processes are highlighted, which might otherwise have been obscured in strictly realist or constructivist treatments. Commonly viewed as an ultimate break, the 1979 revolution, from a historical standpoint, reveals traces of an enduring strategic calculus and mutual threat perception that remained across regimes and time. The analysis is based on periodisation techniques that draws from numerous sources in identifying three broad phases of the Iran-Israel relations:

1. Strategic Alliance (1948–1979)

2. Revolutionary Rupture (1979–1990s)

3. Regional Confrontation (1990s–2022)

The proposed periodisation is an explanatory scheme and not merely a chronological one, reflecting shifts in the underlying ideational and strategic logics that governed the bilateral relations (See Table 1).

Table 1: Phases of Iran-Israel Relations

Period	Key Features	Nature of Relations	Driving Factors

1948-1979	Strategic cooperation despite no formal ties	Covert alliance	Anti-Arab nationalism, Soviet containment, U.S. mediation
1979-1990	Post-revolution hostility	Open enmity	Regime change, anti-Zionist ideology, hostage crisis
1990-Present	Proxy competition intensifies (1990-2000); Nuclear tensions and asymmetric warfare (2000-2010); Regional realignments (Abraham Accords), 2010-Present	Indirect confrontation (1990-2000); Escalating rivalry (2000-2010); Entrenched hostility (2010-Present)	Hezbollah, Hamas, end of Cold War (1990-2000); Iran's nuclear programme, 2006 Lebanon War (2000-2010); U.S. withdrawal from JCPOA, proxy conflicts in Syria, Yemen

Source: Author (2025)

The study draws heavily on secondary sources. The reasons for this method of data collection are multifaceted. First, access to Iranian archival material that might hold primary sources of information from Iranian government is highly restricted. Second, the secretive nature of the relations between Iran and Israel—both during the time of alliance and during the phase of proxy conflict—themselves entail well-known constraints on experiential verification. The constraints could be somewhat reduced using source triangulation from multiple independent sources. Consequently, secondary sources such as monographs, peer-reviewed journals articles, think-tank reports, and media analyses were extensively consulted. The works of Parsi (2007), Litvak (2009), Takeyh (2009), and Kaye (2010) among several others were especially key in shaping both conceptual and empirical grounds for this study.

Designing a theoretical framework for the interpretation of the empirical material, this study uses a hybrid theory that mixes constructivist insights and realist analysis. Constructivism, mainly as applied by Wendt (1999) and Barnett (1998), is suitable for studying how identity and normative structures inform the foreign policies of revolutionary Iran and, to some extent, Israel. For instance, Iran's self-identification as the leader of Islamic resistance and the framing of Israel as the "Zionist regime" are ideologically constituted and strategically mobilised. On the other hand, Realism comes handy to explain more satisfactorily Israel's reaction to the Iranian ascendancy with respect to balancing behaviour, deterrence strategy, and alliance formation (Walt, 1987). The fusion of these perspectives thus serves to avoid the constraint of reductive single-paradigm analyses in favour of a multidimensional approach to state behaviour.

Results/Findings

The progress of Iran-Israel relations would be viewed against a three-layer history, consisting of the epoch of strategic association (1948-1979), the post-revolutionary rupture (1979-1990s), and finally the epoch of regional confrontation (1990-2022). Each of these stages is characterised by the changing geopolitical environment, shifting ideological underpinnings, and reforms in strategic priorities. These results show that the Iran-Israeli rivalry is not merely a product of fixed ideological opposition; rather, it is a consequence of an ongoing historical process.

Strategic Alliance (1948—1979): Pragmatism over Ideology

For the first 30 years following the establishment of Israel in 1948, there existed a clandestine but functioned strategic alliance between Iran and Israel. Pragmatism and regional balancing considerations informed the foreign policy pursued by Iran under *Shah* Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. Despite an official posture of sympathy for Arab causes and a vote against Israel's admission into the United Nations, Tehran recognised Israel *de facto* and carried out significant cooperation in the fields of intelligence, agriculture, trade, and military affairs (Parsi, 2007). The alliance was largely shaped around David Ben-Gurion's "periphery doctrine," which insisted on the formation of alliances with non-Arab states on the periphery of the Arab world—Iran, Turkey, and Ethiopia—to counteract Arab hostility toward Israel (Kaye, 2010). In other words, Israel could offer Iran technological and military expertise, while Tehran supplied Israel with crucial oil access and a listening station in monitoring Soviet and Arab activities.

The Mossad was said to have exchanged intelligence with the Iranian SAVAK, and Israeli companies were purportedly involved in the development of irrigation and agriculture in Iran (Takeyh, 2009). In turn, Israel received nearly 40% of its oil during the 1960s and '70s from Iran, a critical asset during the Arab oil embargoes (Litvak, 2009). In any event, however, the alliance had an element of frailty to it. It depended on the *Shah's* dictatorial control and was vehemently opposed by the Iranian clergy and a significant sector of the populace. These considered Israel an illegitimate entity and equated its occupation of Jerusalem with the oppression of Muslims. This societal undercurrent of tension would be a beforehand sign of the coming wrenching rupture.

Revolutionary Rupture (1979-1990s): From Covert Allies to Ideological Foes

The 1979 Iranian revolution brought about a definite rupture between Iran and Israel. The overthrow of the *Shah* and the rise to power of the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, together, brought a redefinition of the Iranian foreign policy along revolutionary Islamic lines and anti-imperialist lines. With the advent of the Revolution, Israel discreet partner to the West, has now come to be revered as a "Little Satan" (the U.S. being the "Great Satan"), with Iran formally severing all diplomatic and commercial ties with Tel Aviv (Axworthy, 2013). Some symbolic events heralded this rupture: the Israeli embassy in Tehran was handed over to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO); Iran suspended support to Palestinian resistance groups. This ideological realignment was also very much in practice as material and financial backing was

provided by Iran to anti-Israel actors, like Hezbollah in Lebanon, which was conceived in 1982 in opposition to the Israeli invasion.

Table 2: Core Areas of Rivalry

Dimension	Iran's Perspective	Israel's Perspective
Ideology	Anti-Zionist, Islamic solidarity with Palestine	Iran as existential threat to Jewish state
Security	Deterrence through proxies and missile/nuclear capability	Preemptive strikes, military superiority
Regional Influence	Expanding influence via Hezbollah, Syria, Iraq, Yemen etc.	Containment via Arab normalisation (Abraham Accords)
International Diplomacy	Resistance to Western hegemony	Lobbying U.S. and EU for sanctions and pressure

Source: Author (2025)

Yet it was not without its paradoxes: in the early years of Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988), Israel covertly supported Iran under the so-called *Iran-Contra Affair*, in an attempt to counterbalance Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, which Israel viewed as a more immediate threat (Byman, 2005). Arms from Israel were channelled to Iran through a covert operation backed by the United States, showing that despite the ironic ideological phrasing of intentions after the revolution, pragmatism occasionally trumped the enmities publicly declared. Nevertheless, the general situation for the most part of this period was one of hardening hostility. Increasingly, Iran's state ideology framed Israel as not only an occupier but an existential threat to Islamic values and regional justice. The clerical leadership promoted a foreign policy based on "exporting the revolution," and support for Palestine became the bedrock of the Islamic Republic's legitimacy, both at home and in its regional endeavours (Ansari, 2006).

Regional Confrontations (1990s–2022): Proxy Wars and Strategic Struggle

The post-Cold War era heralded a new phase of intensification in the Iran-Israel rivalry, moving from the covert stage to regional confrontation, largely through proxy wars, rhetorical escalations, and nuclear deterrence. Iran's support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestinian territories became more open in the 1990s. Israel, in turn, became convinced that Iran was both an existential and geopolitical threat. Israeli leaders, such as Yitzhak Rabin and Benjamin Netanyahu, repeatedly posed Iran's nuclear programme as a direct existential threat to the Jewish state. The Arab-Israeli conflict gradually faded from its primary role in Middle Eastern politics, and Iran began to assert itself as a regional power post-Gulf War (Ehteshami & Zweiri, 2007).

The competition saw a new height in the 2000s after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq and the ensuing regional assertiveness of Iran. Tehran benefitted from the vacuum in Baghdad to extend its influence over the Levant. Israel responded by bombing Iranian targets in Syria and is alleged to have sabotaged Iranian nuclear facilities and personnel. The killings of Iranian nuclear scientists, the Stuxnet cyber-attack, and other clandestine initiatives point to the asymmetric nature of this ongoing confrontation (Fulton, 2013). Another important event that momentarily altered the strategic landscape was the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), otherwise called the Iran nuclear deal. Whilst most of the international community saw it as a diplomatic triumph, Israel, under Netanyahu, violently opposed it, arguing that it legitimised Iran's nuclear infrastructure and emboldened its regional activities (Geranmayeh & Batmanghelidj, 2017). Israel actively lobbied for U.S. withdrawal from the agreement—a fate that became a reality in 2018 with President Donald Trump's exit from the deal amid much Iranian condemnation.

Figure 1: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Iran Supreme Leader Ali Khameini



Source: India Today (2025)

Entering the 2020s, the rivalry continues to escalate with states carrying out reciprocal cyber-attacks and shadow naval operations in the Gulf as well as air strikes in Syria. While Iran has cemented its regional footprint by tying itself up with non-state actors such as

Houthis in Yemen and Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq, Israel has strengthened its backbone with Gulf Arab states like the United Arab Emirates under the Abraham Accords, partly as a counterbalance to Iran (Miller & Savyon, 2020). The latest and most direct confrontations between the two states was an intense 12-day conflict that erupted on 13 June 2025 after Israel launched a preemptive air strikes on Iranian military and nuclear sites killing important nuclear scientists and military commanders. According to news reports on *Aljazeera*, at least 610 Iranians were killed in Israeli attacks, while 28 people were killed in Iranian counterattacks (Chughtai, 2025). Although peace was brokered with the help of American President Donald Trump, it is apparent that hostilities between the two countries will continue for some time.

These findings highlight the metamorphosis of the Iran-Israel relationship from a covert strategic alliance to one of the most virulent rivalries in the modern Middle East. The rivalry is rooted in ideology but has also been driven by changing regional dynamics, regime interests, and external interventions.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the historical analysis of the Iran-Israel relations reveal a core paradox in international affairs—the coexistence of ideological opposition and pragmatic engagement. The transition from covert allies to overt enemies exemplifies the flexibility of interstate relations under shifting ideological regimes, domestic political changes, and systemic geopolitical pressures. This section interprets the results from theoretical and comparative perspectives in an attempt to study how realism, constructivism, and regime type theories may contribute to the explication of the Iran-Israeli rivalry.

From Realpolitik to Ideological Hostility: The Role of Regime Change

The 1948–1979 alliance between Israel and Iran showcases some of the explanatory powers realist assumptions in international relations. Although without formal diplomatic recognition, both states underwent extensive cooperation because their strategic interests converged, especially against Arab nationalism and Soviet influence. This pragmatic orientation is in keeping with neorealist theory, which posits that irrespective of domestic ideology, states prioritise survival and balance of power in an anarchic international system. (Waltz, 1979).

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 seems to have disrupted this realist conception. The emergence of the theocratic regime under the leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini injected a normative element into Iran's foreign affairs that deviated from pure self-interest. Thus, Iran saw Israel not just as a regional competitor but as an ideological opponent, illegitimate, and hostile to Islamic justice. This shift withholds a good part of the constructivist insight on the nature of state interests and identities being socially constructed and can be transformed through historical processes and political change (Wendt, 1999).

Regime change in this instance was more than a domestic affair; rather, the entire regional posture was recalibrated as a result. Unlike monarchical Iran, revolutionary Iran underpinned its legitimacy on opposition to Western imperialism and solidarity with the

Palestinian cause. This partly explains why the Islamic Republic, despite occasional opportunities for pragmatic engagement (such as during the Iran-Iraq War), had preferred to sustain its antagonism towards Israel rhetorically and in policy. Hence, approaches in foreign policy analysis that incorporate regime ideology and identity formation arguably offer a more refined understanding than realism *per se*.

The Politics of Memory and Symbolism

Another dimension of the rivalry was the instrumentalisation of historical narratives and political memory. Iran had often referred to Islamic history, particularly the concept of resistance against tyranny, in order to construct Israel as a usurper and oppressor. In turn, Israel referred often to the memory of the Holocaust and the logic of self-defence to justify its adversarial position against Iran's nuclear programme and regional proxies.

Symbolic competition carries material consequences: for example, Iran's Quds Day (Jerusalem Day) and its funding of groups like Hezbollah and Hamas served both domestic legitimation and regional strategic ends. These acts projected Iranian ideological hegemony within the Islamic world, while simultaneously encircling Israel through proxy alliances. In response, Israel instituted a security discourse which portrayed Iran as an existential threat, not entirely on account of its nuclear aspirations but more so due to its ideology. This set of ideas has justified pre-emptive military ventures and extended lobbying overseas, especially in Washington. Hence this rivalry was also a discursive contest over legitimacy, sovereignty, and the rightful order in the Middle East. Such mutual "othering" reinforced identity-based conflict, a phenomenon witnessed in other enduring rivalries like India-Pakistan and U.S.-Cuba. Once constructed, enemy images are difficult to dislodge, even if material interests begin to change.

Strategic Competition and the Proxy Warfare Paradigm

The post-1990s period in Iran-Israel hostilities was basically typified by asymmetric conflicts and proxy wars. This itself is one facet of a larger trend in the study of international relations—one where direct interstate wars have become increasingly infrequent and are now being replaced by a series of so-called hybrid confrontations that include cyber-attacks, targeted assassinations, sabotage, and influence operations. Iran's logistics support to Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis, and a number of *Shia* militias all over the region is a networked strategy that increases its deterrent capacity while at the same time avoiding all-out war. In the name of preemptive containment, Israel launched airstrikes in Syria, carried out assassination operations against Iranian nuclear scientists, and undertook a cyber-attack, known as Stuxnet, to sabotage Iran's regional entrenchment without direct war (Cordesman, 2020).

These highlight an important concern—the security dilemma—wherein one state's efforts at achieving security translate into threats in the eyes of the other, which in retaliation takes countermeasures, thereby increasing insecurity for both actors. The cyclical escalation has resulted in a precarious equilibrium where neither party desires full-blown war but both embark on dangerous moves that could lead to miscalculations. Furthermore, its internationalisation of the rivalry—particularly through U.S., Russia, and Gulf Arab states' involvement—has helped to cement the conflict amid broader global contexts. The

Abraham Accords thus represented a shift in Arab-Israeli relations that has strategically isolated Iran, thereby deepening the alignment of Israel with Tehran's regional foes.

The Nuclear Question and Strategic Narratives

One of the most highly disputed dimensions of the Iran-Israeli rivalry was Iran's nuclear programme. Israel considered even a latent nuclear capability as unacceptable contending that this would embolden Tehran's regional posture and diminished strategic deterrence of Israel. In contrast, Iran had insisted that it should have a right to civilian nuclear technology under the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) while framing Israel as a nuclear hypocrite that refused to sign the NPT as well as refused to acknowledge its own arsenal (Kaye, 2010).

The nuclear discourse feeds into broader strategic narratives. For Israel, it channels international pressure and makes preventive action legitimate; for Iran, it feeds resistance to Western coercion and asserts sovereign rights. The JCPOA suspended this dynamic for a while. But the suspension has ended with the 2018 collapse of the JCPOA and rise in Iranian violations of uranium enrichment caps, pushing the issue back to an up-front focus. While some analysts cite deterrence as mutual stabilisers of the rivalry, just as the Cold War might, others stress the ideological character of the struggle, the fluidity of the regional environment, and the development of proxy conflicts as making any such outcome far less certain (Sagan, 2006). Furthermore, with the absence of direct communication networks and crisis management mechanism absent, inadvertent escalation risks are higher.

The Ideology vs. Interest Debate: Reassessing the Rivalry's Nature

One of the central questions arising from the above findings is: "Is the Iran-Israeli rivalry, in essence, ideological or strategic?" The historical record suggests that it is both, but in varying proportions depending upon the period.

- During the pre-1979 period, strategic interests overrode ideological differences.
- Post-1979, ideology became central to Iran's posture, though not immutable (e.g., Iran-Contra Affair).
- In more recent times, both states pursued national interests shaped and sometimes constrained by ideological frameworks.

This supports the view that ideological enmity is not static but contextually shaped. Even in moments of intense hostility, there are openings for limited cooperation or pragmatic restraint. For instance, despite their fierce rivalry, Iran and Israel have both signaled—at various times—a willingness to avoid full-scale war. This indicates that beneath the surface-level animosity lie calculated strategic preferences, albeit filtered through divergent worldviews.

Conclusion

This study has historicised Israel-Iran relations, demonstrating that the bilateral rivalry cannot be understood solely through the lens of ideology or strategic interest, but rather as a dynamic interplay of both, intermediated by domestic politics, regional power shifts, and international interventions. The historical trajectory from covert strategic alliance (1948–1979) to revolutionary rupture (1979–1990s), and finally to regional confrontation (1990s–2022) is a testimony to the fluid interstate relations and the enduring impact of regime change on foreign policy orientations. The analysis demonstrates that even as ideological enmity has shaped Iran's posture and Israel's threat perceptions, pragmatic calculations—such as covert support during the Iran-Iraq War and temporary tactical adjustments—have periodically moderated the rivalry, reflecting a persistent strategic rationality beneath ideological rhetoric.

The study further highlights the importance of identity, symbolism, and political memory as sustaining factors of conflict. Iran's self-identification as the bastion of Islamic resistance and Israel's portrayal of Iran as an existential threat have contributed to a cycle of reciprocal "othering," which provides a fertile ground for proxy conflicts, cyber engagements, and nuclear anxieties. The post-1990s proliferation of asymmetric engagements, coupled with regional realignments such as the Abraham Accords, illustrates how long-term rivalries adapt to changing geopolitical and systemic contexts while maintaining continuity in strategic objectives and threat perceptions.

Theoretically, the study demonstrates the theoretical possibility offered by weaving together constructivist and realist frameworks. While constructivism accentuates the influence of identity, ideology, and normative narratives in state behaviour, a realist approach focuses on enduring power calculations, deterrence strategies, and regional security imperatives. By combining these lenses, the study offers a balanced understanding of how ideological commitments and strategic interests interact over time, producing both conflict and restricted engagement.

.The findings have important implications for policymakers and international actors. Recognising the historical roots and multidimensional drivers of the Iran-Israel rivalry is essential for designing credible conflict mitigation strategies, anticipating potential escalation, and identifying opportunities for de-escalation or limited cooperation. Policy measures that address both material threats such as nuclear capabilities and proxy networks, and ideational dimensions such as ideological narratives and domestic legitimising discourses stand a greater chance of reducing tensions. Furthermore, the study contributes to the broader literature on enduring interstate rivalries, illustrating how long-term enmities are sustained through a combination of structural, ideational, and strategic factors.

Finally, the Israel-Iran relationship is a paradigmatic example of a rivalry that evolves through overlapping periods of alliance, enmity, and strategic competition. Understanding its historical arc offers critical insights into the mechanisms that sustain conflict and offers guidance for both scholars and policymakers seeking to navigate the complex landscape of Middle Eastern geopolitics. Future research should continue to explore the interaction of ideology, strategy, and external interventions, particularly in light of emerging regional

actors, technological innovations in warfare, and shifting global power configurations, to better anticipate the trajectory of this and other entrenched rivalries.

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