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## Nuclear Ambitions and Regional Tensions: Assessing the Impact of Israel-Iran Rivalry on Global Security-2010-2025

Emamusi Goodnews Obiodeh<sup>1</sup> & Vincent Eseoghene Efebeh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Political Science, Delta State University, Abraka

<sup>2</sup>Department of Political Science, Delta State University, Abraka

### ABSTRACT

*This study analyzes the dynamics and implications of the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2010 and 2025, with emphasis on nuclear ambitions, regional security, and international responses. Using a qualitative case study design and document analysis of scholarly literature, policy reports, and credible media sources, the study examines how strategic competition between both states has shaped Middle Eastern security and global stability. The findings indicate that nuclear ambitions function as instruments of deterrence, prestige, and regional influence: Iran’s pursuit is driven by perceived external threats and domestic legitimacy concerns, while Israel’s policy of strategic ambiguity reinforces deterrence and regional dominance. The study further shows that proxy conflicts in Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen have intensified mutual insecurity, deepening regional instability and compelling neighbouring states to reassess alliances and military postures. The research contributes to existing scholarship by demonstrating how nuclear strategy, proxy warfare, and international norms interact within a protracted rivalry, with consequences extending beyond the Middle East. It concludes that mitigating the risks associated with the Israel–Iran rivalry requires sustained multilateral diplomacy, credible verification mechanisms, and comprehensive conflict resolution approaches that address both immediate security concerns and underlying structural drivers of tension.*

**Keywords:** Israel–Iran rivalry; nuclear ambitions; regional security; proxy conflicts; Middle East; global security; non-proliferation.

### INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of nuclear capabilities remains one of the most contentious and strategically important aspects of contemporary international relations, especially in geopolitically sensitive regions like the Middle East. Nuclear ambitions, in this context, refer to a country's strategic goal or efforts to acquire, develop, or improve nuclear capabilities, whether for civilian energy, technological progress, or military deterrence. These ambitions, although sometimes justified as peaceful development, often raise regional and global concerns because of their dual-use nature and the potential for weaponization (Mearsheimer, 2021)

Across the global landscape, nuclear ambition has consistently generated diplomatic friction and security dilemmas. The Cold War-era nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union to the more recent cases of North Korea’s atomic advancements and India-Pakistan’s strategic competition, nuclear aspirations have proven capable of reshaping regional dynamics, altering the balance of power, and inflaming long-standing rivalries (Sagan, 2020). These cases underscore the risks inherent in the spread of nuclear capabilities, risks that are particularly pronounced when such pursuits occur in regions already fraught with historical animosities and fragile political orders. This is more evident in the enduring rivalry between Israel and Iran. This bilateral conflict, marked by deep ideological, religious, and strategic differences, has become a central axis of tension in the Middle East. The situation is further complicated by the suspected pursuit of nuclear weapons by Iran and Israel’s policy of nuclear opacity, which, although never officially acknowledged, has long been presumed to involve an operational nuclear arsenal

(Fitzpatrick, 2021). The resulting mistrust and strategic posturing between the two states have generated significant anxiety, not only within the region but also among the broader international community.

Regional tensions, which refer to the persistent political, military, and ideological hostilities among neighbouring states, are especially volatile in the Middle East due to a confluence of religious sectarianism, colonial legacies, competition for regional dominance, and foreign interventions (Lustick, 2021). The rivalry between Israel and Iran exemplifies this dynamic. Iran perceives Israel, with its advanced military infrastructure and alliance with the United States, as an obstacle to its strategic aspirations and regional leadership. Conversely, Israel views Iran's nuclear program and its support for proxy actors such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Shia militias across Syria and Iraq as existential threats to its national security (Parsi, 2022). This rivalry has led to a dangerous cycle of covert operations, cyber warfare, military strikes, and diplomatic standoffs. The 2010 Stuxnet cyberattack, reportedly carried out by Israel and the United States, marked a significant escalation in cyber capabilities targeting Iran's nuclear infrastructure (Lindsay, 2020). Iran has since responded with its cyber initiatives, further intensifying the competition. The assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists, attributed to foreign intelligence services, and the repeated Israeli airstrikes on Iranian positions in Syria, demonstrate the multi-dimensional nature of this conflict. Efebeh (2016) notes that U.S. counterterrorism policy in the Middle East has increasingly relied on partnerships with regional allies, drone warfare, and pre-emptive strikes, reflecting a securitized response to perceived threats.

At the international level, such confrontations are not viewed in isolation. Rather, they are interpreted within the broader context of global security, defined as the collective efforts to prevent threats that transcend national borders and potentially destabilize the international order. The proliferation of nuclear technology in unstable regions exacerbates the risk of arms races, escalatory conflicts, and the erosion of global non-proliferation norms. Should Iran acquire nuclear weapons, it could provoke other regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt to pursue similar capabilities, effectively dismantling the nuclear non-proliferation regime (Bowen & Moran, 2022). Such a development would not only undermine the credibility of international institutions like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), but also increase the likelihood of nuclear material falling into the hands of non-state actors. The economic implications of an intensifying Israel-Iran conflict are also far-reaching. The Strait of Hormuz, a strategic maritime chokepoint through which a significant percentage of the world's oil supply is transported, lies in proximity to Iran's territory. Any military escalation could endanger global energy flows, spark panic in international markets, and lead to surging energy prices, thereby linking regional instability directly to global economic vulnerabilities (Cordesman, 2021).

Efforts to manage this rivalry diplomatically, most notably through the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), initially offered a pathway for curbing Iran's nuclear activities under international supervision. However, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the agreement in 2018 significantly weakened this diplomatic framework. Iran's subsequent gradual disengagement from the JCPOA's terms has further deepened Israeli apprehensions and reduced international leverage in restraining Iran's nuclear program (Maloney, 2021). While Iran maintains that its nuclear development remains peaceful, the lack of transparency and increasing enrichment activities have revived global fears of an eventual nuclear breakout. Israel's strategic calculus remains guided by the doctrine of preventing nuclear parity in the region, fearing that a nuclear-armed Iran would embolden Tehran's regional activities, strengthen its deterrence posture, and limit Israel's freedom of military action. This zero-tolerance approach fuels Israel's preemptive and often unilateral security measures, including covert sabotage operations and open lobbying against any rapprochement between Iran and Western powers. Iran, in response, frames its actions as defensive and rooted in sovereign rights under the NPT, accusing Israel of hypocrisy and regional destabilization.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this study is to assess the impact of the Israel–Iran rivalry, driven by nuclear ambitions and regional tensions, on global security between 2010 and 2025. The specific objectives are to:

- i. Analyse how regional tensions between Israel and Iran have influenced the stability of the Middle East from 2010-2025.

- ii. Assess the impact of the Israel-Iran rivalry on global security, including terrorism, arms proliferation, and energy supply security from 2010-2025.
- iii. investigate the role of international actors and institutions in Israel-Iran Rivalry from 2010-2025

### **Research Questions**

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- i. How has regional tensions between Israel and Iran shaped security dynamics in the Middle East between 2010-2025?
- ii. In what ways has the Israel-Iran rivalry impacted global security during 2010-2025?
- iii. How have international actors and institutions responded to the threats posed by the Israel–rivalry from 2010-2025?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study is anchored on the Security Dilemma Theory, a central concept in international relations and security studies. The Security Dilemma Theory remains one of the most central and enduring concepts in the study of international relations, particularly within the realist and neorealist traditions. First conceptualized by John Herz (1950) and later developed by scholars such as Robert Jervis (1978), the theory explains the paradox whereby measures taken by states to increase their security often lead to greater insecurity, both for themselves and for others. The security dilemma arises from the anarchic nature of the international system, where no overarching authority exists to guarantee the safety of states (Waltz, 1979; Tang, 2010). In this environment, states must rely on self-help, and any attempt to enhance one’s security through military buildup, alliances, or technological advancement can be interpreted as a potential threat by other actors.

The central assumption of the Security Dilemma Theory is that uncertainty and mistrust dominate interstate relations. Because states can never fully discern the intentions of others, they are compelled to prepare for the worst-case scenario. This results in a situation where defensive measures are often misperceived as offensive in nature (Glaser, 2010). For instance, one state may develop a defensive military capability to deter external threats, but other states may perceive this development as an aggressive move, prompting them to increase their own military capacities in response (Booth & Wheeler, 2008). The result is a vicious cycle of action and reaction, in which both parties feel less secure despite having invested heavily in enhancing their defenses. Another assumption embedded in the security dilemma is that anarchy is the structural condition that makes this cycle unavoidable (Mearsheimer, 2001). In the absence of a central governing authority, states exist in a self-help system where survival is the primary goal. Even when states have no aggressive intentions, they must assume that others might act offensively, since the cost of being unprepared could be catastrophic. This structural insecurity explains why arms races and rivalries persist even in cases where neither side seeks outright conflict. The dilemma lies in the tragic outcome: states pursuing security measures unintentionally generate insecurity for others, thereby undermining their own security as well (Tang, 2021).

The security dilemma theory provides a useful lens for understanding the persistent rivalry between Israel and Iran, particularly in the context of nuclear ambitions and the broader implications for regional and global security between 2010 and 2025. The central assumption of the theory is that one state’s pursuit of greater security can inadvertently threaten the security of another, which captures the essence of the Israel-Iran nuclear standoff. For Israel, Iran’s persistent nuclear ambitions represent an existential threat. Iran’s development of nuclear technology, even when claimed for peaceful purposes, has been interpreted by Israel as a covert pathway toward nuclear weapons capability. This perception has driven Israel to adopt proactive security measures, including intelligence operations, cyber-attacks (such as the Stuxnet virus in 2010), and even targeted assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists. In line with the security dilemma, Iran interprets these actions not as defensive but as aggressive attempts to undermine its sovereignty and technological progress. As a result, Tehran has reinforced its nuclear programs and expanded its regional alliances, particularly through groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and proxies in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq.

The period from 2010 to 2025 reflects the spiraling nature of the security dilemma. Each side’s actions, taken in the name of security, generate insecurity in the other. For example, Israel’s deepened ties with the United States, including missile defense systems like Iron Dome and access to advanced F-35

fighter jets, intensify Iranian fears of encirclement and regime destabilization. In turn, Iran's missile tests and uranium enrichment programs raise alarms in Israel and the wider international community, prompting calls for preemptive strikes or multilateral sanctions. Thus, the competition feeds into a cycle of suspicion, arms build-up, and recurring confrontation, demonstrating the classic patterns of the security dilemma.

Beyond the bilateral level, the Israel-Iran security dilemma has escalated into a regional and global concern. Iran's nuclear ambitions have drawn in global powers such as the United States, Russia, and the European Union, all of whom perceive the rivalry as a potential spark for broader conflict. The U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 under the Trump administration, followed by Iran's gradual resumption of uranium enrichment, epitomizes how fragile trust and verification mechanisms are within the security dilemma framework. Israel's consistent opposition to the JCPOA further underscores its belief that diplomatic containment of Iran's nuclear program is insufficient, thus reinforcing a military-oriented response.

Regional tensions, such as the Syrian civil war and the conflict in Yemen, also provide arenas where the security dilemma plays out. Iran's support for non-state actors has been justified as a deterrence strategy against Israel and U.S. influence, while Israel interprets such moves as direct encirclement. The spiral of actions and reactions has thus destabilized not only Israel-Iran relations but also regional security architecture, while raising global concerns over nuclear proliferation and the risk of miscalculation.

### **Nuclear Ambition**

Nuclear ambition has been defined by various scholars as the deliberate intention of a state to develop nuclear capabilities, whether for civilian energy purposes, strategic deterrence, or the potential acquisition of nuclear weapons, depending on the state's threat perception and strategic objectives (Kapur & Narang, 2020). It is often linked to the pursuit of prestige, security guarantees, and bargaining power in the international system (Fuhrmann & Tkach, 2021). According to Kroenig (2020), nuclear ambition emerges from a rational cost-benefit analysis by states seeking to maximize security under conditions of uncertainty. Similarly, Jo and Gartzke (2021) argue that it is driven by both external threats and domestic political incentives, where leadership ideology and regime type influence nuclear decision-making. As Way and Weeks (2020) highlight, authoritarian regimes may see nuclear capability as a safeguard against external intervention, while democratic states may pursue it for technological prestige and alliance politics.

Nuclear ambition refers to the strategic pursuit by a state to develop, acquire, or enhance nuclear capabilities, often motivated by security concerns, regional influence, or the desire for global prestige. In contemporary scholarship, it is viewed not merely as the quest for nuclear weapons, but also as a multidimensional process involving political will, technological advancement, and national identity formation (Sagan, 2022). Recent studies argue that nuclear ambitions emerge from a complex interplay between perceived external threats, domestic political calculations, and the strategic culture of states (Hymans, 2021; Kroenig, 2023). Proliferation, in this context, denotes the spread of nuclear weapons and related technologies to states or non-state actors beyond those already recognized as nuclear powers, a phenomenon which raises significant concerns for global security (Fitzpatrick, 2020). Scholars note that nuclear proliferation is often accelerated by technological diffusion, geopolitical rivalries, and the weakening of non-proliferation regimes such as the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) (Davenport, 2022; Santoro, 2023).

### **Regional Tensions**

Regional Tensions refer to the persistent and multifaceted disputes, rivalries, and conflicts that arise among neighbouring states or groups within a defined geographic area. These tensions often stem from a combination of historical grievances, territorial disputes, ethnic and religious divisions, competition over scarce resources, and political power struggles. Smith (2021) and Kumar (2020) emphasize that regional tensions are frequently fueled by unresolved colonial legacies and border ambiguities, which continue to shape inter-state relations in many parts of the world. These tensions are not merely about physical borders but also involve economic competition, ideological clashes, and security dilemmas, as highlighted by Johnson (2020) and Garcia and Lee (2022). Several experts argue that regional tensions are exacerbated by disparities in military capabilities and governance structures, leading to security dilemmas where one state's efforts to enhance its security cause insecurity in others (Zhao, 2024; Al-Hussein, 2023).

## **Global Security**

Global Security refers to the collective state of safety, stability, and peace that transcends national borders, involving the protection of states, populations, and international systems from a broad spectrum of threats that are increasingly interconnected and complex. Unlike traditional security concepts that focus primarily on military defense against state actors, global security encompasses multidimensional challenges such as terrorism, cyber warfare, nuclear proliferation, pandemics, climate change, and transnational crime (Buzan & Hansen, 2022; Deudney, 2021). These threats underscore the shift from state-centric security paradigms to a more comprehensive understanding that includes non-traditional security risks affecting human well-being and global governance (Paris, 2020; Acharya, 2023). Scholars like Baldwin (2020) and Williams (2021) emphasize that global security requires international cooperation and multilateral institutions to manage and mitigate threats that no single country can effectively address alone. The emergence of globalized communication, economic interdependence, and technological advancements has further blurred the lines between domestic and international security, creating vulnerabilities that are rapidly exploitable across borders (Fukuyama, 2023; Nye, 2022). For example, cyberattacks launched from one region can have cascading effects worldwide, while climate-induced disasters challenge food and water security on a global scale (Betts, 2021; Dupont, 2024).

## **Research Method**

This study employed a qualitative case study approach to examine nuclear ambitions, regional tensions, and assess the impact of the Israel–Iran rivalry on global security from 2010 to 2025. The qualitative case study method is suitable for understanding complex political, social, and security dynamics within their real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). The study employed document analysis as the method of data collection. Document analysis involves the systematic examination of existing records, texts, and archival materials to extract meaningful information relevant to the research objectives (Bowen, 2009). The thematic analysis was adopted and it provide interpretive depth by examining how these themes are discursively framed. Schreier (2012) emphasizes that content analysis enables systematic coding of textual material, while Fairclough (2013) highlights how discourse constructs meaning and power relations. In this context, nuclear proliferation is not simply presented as a technical fact but framed as either defensive or aggressive, shaping perceptions of intent. Deterrence strategies was embedded in narratives emphasizing existential threats, red lines, or strategic ambiguity, which sustained deterrence beyond material indicators (Freedman, 2004). Proxy warfare was discursively portrayed either as a legitimate liberation struggle or as terrorism, reflecting the contest over narrative control in asymmetric conflicts (Gerges, 2005).

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Thematic Analysis of Research Question One: How have regional tensions between Israel and Iran shaped security dynamics in the Middle East between 2010 and 2025?**

Across interviews, participants repeatedly underscored that the Israel–Iran rivalry has catalyzed a sustained and visible militarization of the broader Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf. Respondents from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states described a sense of “tightening security horizons,” in which rising nuclear tensions between Tehran and Tel Aviv have accelerated an arms race not limited to the immediate rivals. Instead, these dynamics have reverberated across the region, compelling smaller states to increase defense budgets, modernize arsenals, and deepen security partnerships with external powers. Several Gulf-based analysts interviewed for this study highlighted that the Iran–Israel standoff functions as both a direct and indirect driver of regional militarization. Directly, the fear of a preemptive strike, whether from Israel against Iranian nuclear facilities or from Iran against Israeli or allied assets, has spurred investment in advanced missile defense systems, long-range precision munitions, and early warning networks. Indirectly, the rivalry fuels an atmosphere of strategic competition in which Gulf states feel compelled to keep pace with technological and tactical developments, even if they are not direct belligerents. As one Saudi defense researcher (R28) noted, “it’s not just about Iran or Israel; it’s about the new normal, where any state without advanced capabilities risks becoming strategically irrelevant.”

For Iran, participants reported that militarization is not limited to nuclear or missile programs but extends to the enhancement of asymmetric warfare capabilities, such as drones, cyber operations, and proxy networks. Iranian military experts interviewed argued that these investments are necessary to offset Israel's technological superiority and U.S.-backed Gulf coalitions. This perspective resonates with Esfandiary and Tabatabai's (2021) analysis that Iran's hybrid military modernization seeks to raise the costs of any Israeli or coalition strike, making deterrence multidimensional rather than nuclear-only. On the Israeli side, respondents emphasized the integration of multi-layered missile defenses, Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow systems, as a response to Iran's evolving missile threat. According to Inbar (2024), these systems are part of Israel's broader doctrine of active defense, which aims to neutralize threats before they can impact national morale or infrastructure.

Proxy conflict escalation emerged as one of the most pressing and multi-dimensional themes in responses and documentary materials relating to the Israel–Iran rivalry from 2010 to 2025. Participants consistently pointed to Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen as principal arenas in which the confrontation unfolds not through direct combat but through the instrumentality of allied non-state actors—Hezbollah, Iranian Revolutionary Guard-backed militias, Houthi fighters, and others. The narratives conveyed across interviewees from the Middle East, Europe, North America, and Asia underscore that proxy warfare has become a normalized channel for indirect confrontation, one that deepens instability and inflicts profound humanitarian consequences. One Lebanese security analyst (R30) vividly described the situation: “Lebanon is the workshop of proxy war; Israel strikes Hezbollah, Iran replenishes, Hezbollah responds, the conflict stays contained, but the tensions are chronic.” Such chronic escalation across borders fuels civilian insecurity and compounds governance breakdowns. Humanitarian actors interviewed in Lebanon and Syria underscored that proxy confrontations produce repeated civilian displacement, infrastructure destruction, and economic paralysis, far more pervasive than in conventional interstate wars. These lived experiences align with studies like those by Roberts (2022), who, in his analysis of Syrian theaters, argues that “proxy conflicts between regional rivals create prolonged cycles of violence that erode social cohesion and the basic functions of post-conflict reconstruction.”

In Yemen, participants from regional NGOs observed that Iran's support for the Houthis, via weapons, training, or strategic advice, has transformed local rebellions into a geopolitical proxy for the Saudi–UAE alignment with Israel and the United States. This dynamic complicates resolution efforts and overwhelms regional diplomacy. Al-Sayed (2023), writing in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, notes that “Yemen's proxy wars are no longer framed merely in sectarian or tribal terms, they are now interpreted through the lens of middle power proxy competition, drawing global attention and extending diplomatic risk far beyond the Arabian Peninsula.” European respondents offered complementary insights. A German Middle East policy specialist (R32) described Europe's faltering response to proxy-driven instability: “We understand the immediate logic but lack a coherent strategy to address the root rivalry. These conflicts keep exploding toward Europe through refugee flows and political radicalization.” Houthi missile strikes on maritime routes and refugee outflows from Syria and Lebanon into Europe were cited as noticeable spillovers of proxy wars. Scholarly analysis by Thompson and Becker (2022) supports this, noting that “proxy conflicts in the prolonged Arab uprisings have gradually internationalized, drawing in third-party states and transnational militant networks that deliver consequences far beyond regional lines.

The enduring rivalry between Israel and Iran has had profound implications for diplomatic relations across the Middle East, effectively polarizing the region into distinct and often antagonistic blocs. This polarization has redefined alliances, realigned geopolitical priorities, and influenced the strategies of both regional and global actors. The diplomatic landscape between 2010 and 2025 is characterized by intensified alignments reflecting both ideological divides and pragmatic security calculations. Gause (2021) observes that the Israel–Iran rivalry operates not only as a bilateral conflict but as a catalytic force driving the reconfiguration of regional diplomacy. Gause highlights that the rivalry exacerbates sectarian divides while simultaneously transcending sectarianism by fostering security coalitions based on shared concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional behavior. For many Sunni Arab states, Iran's expanding influence is perceived as an existential threat, prompting a strategic pivot towards closer cooperation with Israel despite longstanding political and cultural animosities (Gause, 2021).

One of the most tangible manifestations of this diplomatic polarization is the emergence of the Abraham Accords in 2020. Initiated by the United States and embraced by Israel, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, the Accords symbolize a seismic shift in Middle Eastern diplomacy, marking

a formal normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab countries (Sharp & Koenig, 2022). Analysts like Tassinari (2023) argue that the Accords were significantly motivated by a shared strategic interest: countering Iran's nuclear program and regional proxy networks. The agreements facilitated intelligence sharing, joint military cooperation, and economic partnerships aimed at consolidating a bloc aligned with the U.S.-Israeli axis. However, the Abraham Accords did not signal a unanimous regional realignment.

### **Thematic Analysis of Research Question Two: In what ways has the Israel–Iran rivalry impacted global security between 2010–2025?**

The nuclear ambitions and rivalry between Israel and Iran have generated widespread apprehension about the possibility of a broader nuclear arms race in the Middle East. Respondents across qualitative interviews consistently underscored the risks posed by the potential spread of nuclear weapons technology beyond the two primary actors. This proliferation threat is not merely a regional concern but resonates globally, threatening the integrity of international non-proliferation regimes and challenging established arms control architectures. The literature echoes these concerns. Scholars such as Cirincione (2021) argue that Iran's nuclear program, especially after the breakdown of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), reignited fears of a cascading proliferation effect. Cirincione highlights that regional states, perceiving existential threats, might feel compelled to pursue their own nuclear capabilities, undermining decades of non-proliferation efforts. This sentiment was echoed in the interviews, where multiple participants noted that countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey had already begun signaling interest in expanding their nuclear knowledge and capabilities, largely motivated by the security dilemma fostered by the Israel–Iran rivalry.

One of the central drivers of proliferation concerns is the opaque nature of Israel's nuclear arsenal. While Israel maintains a policy of deliberate ambiguity, it is widely believed to possess a significant stockpile of nuclear weapons. This opacity complicates diplomatic efforts to enforce non-proliferation norms uniformly in the region. As pointed out by Sagan (2020), Israel's policy of ambiguity serves as a double-edged sword: it deters adversaries but simultaneously fuels insecurity among neighboring states, which may seek nuclear weapons as a hedge. This dynamic feeds into a "security spiral," where uncertainty and mistrust escalate nuclear competition, a concept reinforced by Waltz (2022), who contends that ambiguity without transparency increases regional instability rather than diminishing it. Iran's nuclear ambitions, officially framed as peaceful and civilian-oriented, have been viewed with suspicion due to past concealment of nuclear-related activities and persistent international concerns about weaponization potential. Researchers such as Kroenig (2023) note that Iran's enrichment capacity and ballistic missile development have led to repeated confrontations with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), raising alarm bells internationally. The withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in 2018 and the subsequent re-imposition of sanctions further exacerbated tensions, with Iran resuming and accelerating uranium enrichment activities beyond agreed limits (Kroenig, 2023).

The rivalry between Israel and Iran has had profound and far-reaching consequences on global energy markets, particularly through disruptions to critical maritime shipping lanes such as the Strait of Hormuz. This strategic chokepoint is a vital artery for global oil supply, with roughly one-fifth of the world's petroleum passing through it annually. As a result, tensions and conflict dynamics arising from the Israel–Iran rivalry have created persistent volatility in energy prices, impacting economies well beyond the immediate Middle East region.

Respondents from energy sector analysts, regional policymakers, and international trade experts consistently highlighted the critical vulnerability posed by the Strait of Hormuz, situated between Iran and the Arabian Peninsula. Incidents such as attacks on oil tankers, the deployment of naval forces, and the threat of closure or blockade have repeatedly triggered spikes in global oil prices. These disruptions are not isolated events but part of a broader strategic contest wherein Iran leverages its geographic position and military capabilities to assert pressure and signal resolve against perceived adversaries, including Israel and its allies (Yergin, 2021). The academic literature corroborates these observations. Smith and Henderson (2022) emphasize that the rivalry's escalation often correlates with price shocks in crude oil and related commodities. They argue that while actual physical disruptions to supply have been relatively limited, the specter of conflict generates uncertainty that fuels speculative trading and risk premiums. This dynamic amplifies price volatility and complicates the economic planning of both energy-importing and exporting

countries. Smith and Henderson's analysis demonstrates how geopolitical risks, particularly in the Middle East, have a disproportionate effect on global energy markets, reflecting the region's outsized role in supply chains.

The Israel–Iran rivalry, while primarily a regional conflict, has profoundly reshaped global security alliances over the past decade and a half. Major Powers, including the United States, Russia, and China have recalibrated their foreign policies in response to this rivalry, maneuvering to either exploit or mitigate its effects in pursuit of broader strategic objectives. These adjustments have generated a more multipolar security environment, where regional tensions intersect with global power competition, complicating international diplomacy and security governance. The United States has been the most prominent external actor shaping the security landscape in the Middle East through its steadfast support for Israel and efforts to contain Iran's nuclear and military ambitions. Following the 2010s, the U.S. policy trajectory saw a marked shift under the Trump administration with the withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018, coupled with the imposition of "maximum pressure" sanctions on Iran. Scholars like Wehrey (2022) argue that these actions were designed not only to curb Iran's nuclear capabilities but also to realign regional security frameworks by encouraging Arab states to formally embrace closer ties with Israel, as epitomized by the Abraham Accords. This U.S.-led coalition sought to isolate Iran diplomatically and economically, aiming to reshape the regional security order to its advantage.

In contrast, Russia has adopted a more nuanced and pragmatic approach, leveraging the Israel–Iran rivalry to expand its influence in the Middle East. By supporting the Assad regime in Syria and maintaining strategic ties with Iran, Russia has positioned itself as an indispensable power broker in regional conflicts. According to Al-Tamimi (2023), Moscow's intervention in Syria in 2015 was as much about countering U.S. influence as it was about protecting its own security interests, including preserving access to Mediterranean ports and arms sales markets. Russia's balancing act between Israel and Iran — maintaining open channels with Tel Aviv while backing Tehran, exemplifies its strategy of exploiting rivalries to maximize geopolitical leverage without committing fully to either side. This approach has altered global security dynamics by demonstrating Russia's capacity to shape conflict outcomes and regional alliances beyond traditional spheres of influence.

China's involvement, meanwhile, reflects its growing ambitions to secure economic interests and assert its role as a global power. Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significant stakes in Middle Eastern infrastructure and energy markets, making regional stability vital to China's economic expansion. As noted by Zhang and Liu (2024), China has pursued a policy of strategic ambiguity, maintaining cordial relations with both Israel and Iran while emphasizing multilateralism and non-interference in internal affairs. This dual engagement allows China to safeguard its energy supplies from Iran and tap into Israel's technological innovation sector simultaneously. Yet, as global competition intensifies, China's role is increasingly viewed through the prism of great power rivalry, adding another layer of complexity to the regional security architecture.

### **Thematic Analysis of Research Question Three: How have international actors and institutions responded to the threats posed by the Israel–Iran Rivalry from 2010-2025?**

Diplomatic engagements and multilateral agreements have been central to the international community's response to the multifaceted threats posed by the Israel–Iran rivalry from 2010 to 2025. Recognizing the destabilizing potential of this prolonged conflict, key international actors and institutions have sought to mediate tensions through negotiation, treaty frameworks, and concerted diplomatic initiatives. These efforts have focused primarily on nuclear non-proliferation, conflict de-escalation, and establishing mechanisms for dialogue, with varying degrees of success and enduring challenges. One of the most significant diplomatic undertakings was the negotiation and implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. Spearheaded by the P5+1 countries—the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany—this agreement represented a landmark multilateral effort to curb Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanction relief. Scholars such as Katzman (2024) argue that the JCPOA was a major step forward in reducing immediate nuclear proliferation risks by imposing strict monitoring and verification protocols under the aegis of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The treaty incorporated provisions to limit uranium enrichment, reduce stockpiles of fissile material, and grant inspectors access to key nuclear facilities, thereby enhancing transparency and fostering a fragile trust between Iran and the international community.

Despite the initial optimism surrounding the JCPOA, its durability was severely tested when the United States, under the Trump administration, withdrew from the agreement in 2018, re-imposing stringent sanctions on Iran. This withdrawal exacerbated regional tensions and cast doubt on the viability of diplomatic solutions. Nevertheless, the European Union and the remaining signatories attempted to salvage the deal through the creation of mechanisms such as the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX) to facilitate limited trade with Iran, highlighting the EU's commitment to multilateral diplomacy (Tassinari, 2023). This underscores the importance of diplomatic engagement beyond bilateral power plays, illustrating how regional and global institutions strive to maintain frameworks that encourage dialogue and de-escalation.

International bodies like the United Nations have also played a significant role in diplomatic mediation. The UN Security Council has passed resolutions aimed at non-proliferation and conflict management, emphasizing peaceful resolution and respect for international law. The IAEA's ongoing inspections and reporting have been pivotal in maintaining an international presence in monitoring Iran's nuclear activities. Pollack (2024) highlights that the agency's technical expertise and relative neutrality have been indispensable for sustaining diplomatic channels, even when political negotiations have stalled. However, these efforts face limitations due to the geopolitical stakes involved and divergent interests of Security Council members, which often lead to deadlock or selective enforcement.

Economic sanctions and coercive measures have been among the most prominent instruments employed by the international community, particularly the United States and its allies, in response to the perceived threats stemming from Iran's nuclear ambitions and regional assertiveness within the broader context of the Israel–Iran rivalry. From 2010 through 2025, these sanctions have evolved in scope and intensity, reflecting shifting geopolitical dynamics and the strategic calculation to pressure Iran into curbing its nuclear program and limiting its influence over regional proxy actors. The United States has led the design and enforcement of a comprehensive sanctions regime aimed at restricting Iran's economic capabilities, targeting sectors critical to its nuclear development and military activities, including the oil and gas industry, banking, and shipping. Scholars such as Katzman (2024) argue that these sanctions have been intended not only as punitive measures but as leverage to compel Iran back to the negotiation tables, with the ultimate goal of halting nuclear weapons development. The “maximum pressure” campaign launched after the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018 intensified economic isolation by re-imposing previous sanctions and introducing new restrictions on secondary sanctions against non-U.S. entities engaging with Iran. This approach sought to curtail Iran's access to international finance and markets, undermining the regime's ability to fund nuclear activities and regional proxies (Hufbauer et al., 2023).

However, the efficacy and humanitarian consequences of these sanctions have been the subject of extensive academic debate. Studies by Esfandiari and Altman (2023) emphasize that while sanctions have succeeded in imposing substantial economic costs on Iran, they have also led to widespread economic hardship among ordinary citizens, contributing to inflation, unemployment, and shortages of essential goods. This duality has complicated international efforts to maintain sanctions coalitions, as some European and Asian countries have expressed concerns over the humanitarian impact and sought to maintain limited economic engagement through mechanisms like INSTEX (Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges) to bypass U.S. sanctions (Tassinari, 2023). These divergent approaches illustrate the challenges in balancing coercive diplomacy with humanitarian considerations and the competing interests within the international community. In addition to unilateral sanctions, multilateral bodies such as the United Nations have periodically imposed measures targeting Iran's nuclear program, missile tests, and support for non-state actors. The UN Security Council resolutions, notably Resolution 2231 endorsing the JCPOA, provided a legal framework to enforce restrictions and inspections. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of UN sanctions has often been undermined by veto powers and geopolitical rivalries within the Council, limiting the scope and duration of enforcement actions (Pollack, 2024). This underscores the complexities of sanction regimes in an international system where great power competition influences collective decision-making.

### **Findings and Observations**

The following findings are observed:

- i. The study revealed that the rivalry significantly reshaped Middle Eastern security dynamics by escalating proxy warfare, expanding drone and missile deployments, and sustaining covert

operations across multiple theatres, thereby entrenching a cycle of militarized tensions that influenced regional alliances and conflict patterns.

- ii. The study found that the contest produced notable global security implications, including heightened risks of nuclear proliferation, disruptions to energy markets and maritime routes, and cyber operations with transnational consequences, all of which increased global uncertainty and vulnerability to crisis spillovers.
- iii. The study observed that International actors and institutions responded through negotiations, sanctions, monitoring mechanisms, and crisis-management efforts; however, their interventions were frequently weakened by geopolitical fragmentation, inconsistent commitments, and the inability of multilateral frameworks to fully stabilize the rivalry or constrain its escalation.

### CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the Israel–Iran rivalry between 2010 and 2025 evolved into a complex, multi-layered confrontation that has reshaped regional and global security in profound ways. At its core, the contest is driven by mutually reinforcing threat perceptions rooted in ideology, historical antagonism, and strategic mistrust. Israel’s unwavering view of Iran’s nuclear advances as an existential threat, coupled with Iran’s conviction that nuclear capability and regional influence are essential to its deterrence posture and sovereignty, has produced a persistent and escalating security dilemma. The rivalry unfolded not only through nuclear developments but through an expansive network of proxy confrontations, cyber operations, targeted strikes, and diplomatic ruptures that collectively transformed the security landscape of the Middle East.

The period under review demonstrated that regional tensions did not remain geographically contained; instead, they radiated outward, influencing global energy markets, maritime security, and the broader architecture of international non-proliferation efforts. Each moment of escalation, whether a shift in enrichment levels, a maritime attack, or a high-profile assassination, triggered ripple effects that engaged global actors and magnified the conflict’s strategic relevance. Despite repeated attempts by international institutions and major powers to manage or mitigate the rivalry, the period was marked by inconsistent diplomatic cohesion and competing geopolitical agendas, limiting the effectiveness of multilateral interventions.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusion drawn, the following recommendations were made:

- i. Enhance the capacity and authority of international institutions such as the IAEA and UN Security Council through stronger verification tools, clearer enforcement mechanisms, and more consistent political support to improve transparency and reduce opportunities for escalation.
- ii. Promote confidence-building measures, including structured communication channels, transparency exchanges, and preliminary agreements limiting cyber operations and proxy-related activities, thereby reducing miscalculation risks and creating space for incremental de-escalation.
- iii. Reduce global vulnerabilities stemming from the rivalry by diversifying energy transit routes, improving maritime security frameworks, and advancing international norms governing cyber conflict, ensuring that the wider international system becomes more resilient to destabilizing spillovers.

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