Balance of Threat Theory and the Iran-Israel Crisis

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Abstract
The study examined Balance of Threat Theory and the Iran-Israel crisis. The Iran-Israel crisis has developed into a major security concern in the Middle East, marked by escalating military hostilities, nuclear-related tensions, ideological disagreements, and rivalry over regional power and influence. The objectives of the study were to examine the history and overview of the Iran-Israel crisis and analyse the Iran-Israel crisis using the Balance of Threat Theory. The study adopted the Balance of Threat Theory proposed by Stephen Walt in 1987. The study employed a historical research design and applied secondary sources of data. Data were sourced from academic books, journal articles, government documents, policy papers, newspapers, and reliable online publications. The study concluded that the Iran-Israel crisis illustrates the usefulness of Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat Theory in understanding interstate rivalry and security competition. The theory explains that Iran and Israel reacted not merely to each other's military capabilities but also to perceived intentions, offensive strength, geographical proximity, and strategic alliances. Israel's concerns over Iran's nuclear and military capabilities contributed to stronger cooperation with the United States, while Iran sought to enhance its security through military development and regional partnerships. The study recommended that Iran, Israel, and other major players should intensify diplomatic negotiations and confidence-building measures to reduce tensions, prevent miscalculation, and address concerns over nuclear and military activities.

Keywords: *Balance of Threat Theory, crisis, military hostilities, tensions, ideological disagreements, regional power*

Introduction

The strategic rivalry involving the United States, Israel, and Iran has played a major role in influencing the security environment of the Middle East. This rivalry has persisted for decades and has been fuelled by ideological disagreements, struggles for regional influence, and differences in strategic objectives. The United States and Israel have maintained strong diplomatic, political, and military ties, while Iran has sought to strengthen its position as an influential regional actor, especially following the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Parsi, 2007; Sobhani, 1989). The 2026 military intervention by the United States and Israel against Iran can thus be viewed as part of a longer history of strategic rivalry and confrontation in the Middle East. Traditionally, conflicts within the region have often been conducted through proxy groups, clandestine operations, diplomatic tensions, and indirect military engagements rather than prolonged direct warfare between states. In recent years, however, the intensification of hostilities between Iran and Israel, coupled with greater United States involvement, has increased the possibility of direct military confrontation. Reciprocal attacks, strikes against strategic facilities, and growing concerns over Iran's nuclear programme have contributed to an increasingly fragile security environment. Such developments

could reshape the existing balance of power and deepen strategic competition among regional and international powers. The confrontation between Iran and Israel has consequently developed beyond a purely bilateral conflict, reflecting broader contests over regional authority, security, ideology, and strategic influence (Byman, 2020; Juneau, 2015).

Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat Theory offers an appropriate perspective for analysing these developments. The theory proposes that States do not respond solely to the overall power of other states but primarily to the threats they believe those states pose. Military strength, geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and perceived intentions are important considerations in determining how states assess threats and formulate responses. Within the Iran-Israel context, Israel's concerns regarding Iran's military strength, nuclear activities, and expanding regional influence help explain its security policies and strategic actions. Similarly, Iran's perception of Israel as a significant adversary, particularly because of its close strategic relationship with the United States, influences Iran's efforts to strengthen its own security and regional position.

The consequences of the Iran-Israel crisis also go beyond the countries directly involved. The Middle East remains highly important to global politics because of its substantial energy resources, strategic transportation routes, and importance to international security. Any further escalation involving Iran, Israel, and the United States could consequently influence energy prices, international security arrangements, and the foreign-policy calculations of major powers, including Russia and China. The crisis should therefore be understood not only as a regional security problem but also as a conflict with the potential to affect wider international relations and the distribution of power within the global system (Eisenstadt, 2019; Walt, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

The Iran-Israel crisis has developed into a major security concern in the Middle East, marked by escalating military hostilities, nuclear-related tensions, ideological disagreements, and rivalry over regional power and influence. The increasing involvement of the United States has added complexity to the conflict and heightened fears of broader regional instability. Iran's growing military strength and influence across the region have intensified Israel's perception of insecurity, while Iran regards Israel's military capabilities and strategic alliance with the United States as serious threats to its own security. Despite diplomatic initiatives and efforts to control the conflict, relations between Iran and Israel have remained highly strained, with recurring attacks on strategic facilities and continued threats of further military action. These developments have generated concerns about regional stability, shifts in the balance of power, and the possible involvement of other major international actors. Previous studies have examined the Iran-Israel crisis. For instance, Ekevere and Onyari (2026) carried out A Qualitative Study of how the U.S.–Israel–Iran War Reshapes the Long-Term Security Architecture of the Middle East. In the same vein, Kubar and Rehman (2026) investigated Hybrid Warfare and Regional Power Competition: A Case Study of the 2026 Iran–Israel Conflict. Similarly, Gujiya and Ubandawaki (2025) examine the Impact of the Iran-Israel War on the Global Energy Market: Implications for ECOWAS Member States. However, few studies exist that interrogate Balance of Threat Theory and the Iran-Israel crisis. This informs the basis for this paper.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are to;

i. examine the history and overview of the Iran-Israel crisis.

ii. analyse the Iran-Israel crisis using the Balance of Threat Theory.

Literature Review

Concept of Crisis

The English word crisis was borrowed from Latin, which in turn was borrowed from the Greek κρίσις krisis 'discrimination, decision, or crisis'. The noun is derived from the verb κρίνω krinō, which means 'distinguish, choose, or decide'. In English, crisis was first used in a medical context, for the time in the development of a disease when a change indicates either recovery or death, that is, a turning point. It was also used for a major change in the development of a disease (Lanceley, 2016). By the mid-seventeenth century, it took on the figurative meaning of a 'vitally important or decisive stage in the progress of anything', especially a period of uncertainty or difficulty without necessarily implying a decision-point (Woolley, 2020).

Venette (2019) noted that crisis is often linked to the concept of psychological stress and is used to suggest a frightening or fraught experience. In general, crisis is the situation of a complex system when the system functions poorly (the system still functions, but does not break down), an immediate decision is necessary to stop the further disintegration of the system, but the causes of the dysfunction are not immediately identified (the causes are so numerous or unknown that it seems impossible to take a rational, informed decision to reverse the situation) (Swan & Hamilton, 2014). Kieft and Bendell (2021) stated that by complex system we mean something like a family, economy, or society; simple systems do not enter crises. We can speak about a crisis of moral values, an economic or political crisis, but not a motor crisis.

Crisis has several defining characteristics. Seeger et al. (2018) say that crises have four defining characteristics that are specific, unexpected, and non-routine events or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty and threat or perceived threat to an organisation's high-priority goals. Thus, the first three characteristics are that the event is:

1. Unexpected (i.e., a surprise)
2. Creates uncertainty
3. Is seen as a threat to important goals

Venette (2019) argues that crisis is a process of transformation where the old system can no longer be maintained. Therefore, the fourth defining quality is the need for change. If change is not needed, the event could more accurately be described as a failure. Apart from natural crises that are inherently unpredictable (volcanic eruptions and tsunamis, etc.), most of the crises that we face are created by man. Bundy et al. (2017) aver that the requirements of their being unexpected depend upon man failing to note the onset of crisis conditions. Some of our inability to recognise crises before they become dangerous is due to denial and other psychological responses that provide succour and protection for our emotions.

Theoretical Framework

The study adopted the Balance of Threat Theory proposed by Stephen Walt in his article Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power, published in 1987. The theory modified the popular Balance of Power Theory in the neorealist school of international relations. According to the Balance of Threat Theory, the alliance behaviour of States is determined by the threat that they perceive from other States. Walt contends that States generally balance by allying against a perceived threat, while very weak States are more likely to bandwagon with the rising threat to protect their own national security. He points to the example of the alliance patterns of European States before and during World War I and World War II, when nations with a significantly greater combined power allied against the recognised threat of German expansionism.

Walt identifies four criteria States use to evaluate the threat posed by another State: aggregate strength or power, including size, population, latent power, and economic capability; geographic proximity; offensive capability; and offensive or hostile intention. He argues that insofar as other States view an emerging power as possessing those qualities, they are likely to view it as a threat and balance against it. The Balance of Threat Theory modified realism (and the neorealism of Kenneth Waltz) by separating power from threat. In the Balance of Power Theory, which had previously dominated realist analyses, States balance against others whose power (military capabilities) was rising. Greater power was assumed to reflect offensive intentions. Walt argues that not borne out by empirical evidence and that the Balance of Threat Theory, in which States will not balance against those that are rising in power but do not display offensive intentions, gives a better account of the evidence. For instance, the United States was more powerful than the other superpower, the Soviet Union, during the Cold War, but contrary to the Balance of Power Theory, more States (members of NATO) allied with it than with the Soviet Union because the United States displayed intentions that were much less aggressive toward them than those displayed by the Soviet Union. In the Iran-Israel crisis, Israel's concerns over Iran's nuclear programme, military capabilities, and growing regional influence influence its security policies, while Iran perceives Israel and its partnerships with Western powers as significant threats. Thus, the theory helps explain the persistent rivalry, alliance-building, military preparations, and strategic actions between Iran and Israel.

Empirical Review

Ahmed et al. (2025) examine the future trajectories of the threat balance between Iran and Israel against the backdrop of contemporary conflict transformations in the Middle East, drawing on the Balance of Threat Theory as an explanatory framework that transcends traditional balance-of-power logic. The study proceeds from the premise that the conflict is managed within a complex engagement environment in which indirect confrontation, multi-arena dynamics, and an expanded role for non-state actors intersect, rendering deterrence and rules of engagement subject to continuous recalibration. It employed two principal drivers: the nature of the American position—whether supportive of Israeli operations or restraining—and the extent to which Iran and Israel resort to direct use of force versus self-restraint. In light of these drivers, the study proposes three plausible trajectories: Equilibrium Stability, based on controlled mutual deterrence; Equilibrium Adjustment, through calculated escalation to recalibrate the threat balance; and Equilibrium Drift toward a broad comprehensive confrontation. The study concluded that Equilibrium Adjustment is the most likely trajectory in the near-to-medium term, while Equilibrium Stability remains contingent on the persistence of escalation brakes, and comprehensive Equilibrium Drift remains a limited but real possibility given the fragility of the regional environment.

Ekevere and Onyari (2026) carried out A Qualitative Study of how the U.S.–Israel–Iran War Reshapes the Long-Term Security Architecture of the Middle East, which examines how a potential or ongoing United States-Israel-Iran conflict reshapes the long-term security architecture of the Middle East. Using a qualitative research approach based on secondary sources including academic literature, policy reports, and geopolitical analyses, the paper explores the evolving dynamics of regional power competition, alliance formation, and strategic realignment. The findings indicate that the intensification of hostilities among these key actors is transforming traditional patterns of proxy warfare into more confrontation, thereby increasing the risk of large-scale regional instability. The conflict is shown to influence the strategic behaviour of other regional actors, prompting shifts in military cooperation, diplomatic engagement, and security

partnerships. Additionally, the study highlights the role of external powers and emerging security frameworks in redefining deterrence, balance of power, and conflict management in the region. The research concluded that the ongoing geopolitical tensions are likely to produce a more fragmented and multipolar security order, with significant implications for regional stability and global security. Kubar and Rehman (2026) investigated Hybrid Warfare and Regional Power Competition: A Case Study of the 2026 Iran–Israel Conflict and argue that the 2026 Iran- Israel conflict is a watershed event in modern geopolitics as a vivid example of hybrid warfare approaches combined with rivalry on the power level in the region. The work explores the ways state and non-state actors used a multidimensional scale of conventional military actions, cyber warfare, proxy conflicts, information attacks and nuclear coercive communications to promote strategic goals without necessarily entering into full-scale conventional military conflicts. This qualitative case study is based on the hybrid warfare theory and regional power rivalry frameworks as it reviews secondary data comprising peer-reviewed literature, policy reports, and credible news materials published during and after the war. The results show that the Iran-Iran 2026 military conflict was not a singular military incident but the conclusion of a cycle of escalation over a decade-long period in which a proxy war had evolved into a kinetic war. The conflict also revealed the focal role of technological asymmetry, especially in drone warfare, cyber operations and precision-strike capabilities, in the development of modern regional power relations. This research adds to the existing literature on the subject of hybrid warfare by determining some peculiarities of engagement peculiar to the Middle East geopolitical situation.

Gujiya and Ubandawaki (2025) examine the Impact of the Iran-Israel War on the Global Energy Market: Implications for ECOWAS Member States and argue that the Iran-Israel war of June 2025 significantly disrupted global energy markets, with far-reaching implications for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Despite being a resource-rich region, ECOWAS member states remain heavily dependent on imported refined petroleum products, making them vulnerable to energy price shocks and supply chain disruptions. The work examines the impact of the conflict on global oil and gas markets and assesses its consequences for West Africa‘s energy security. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative analysis of energy price fluctuations and qualitative case studies of ECOWAS nations, the study highlights the structural weaknesses in the region‘s energy sector, including inadequate refining capacity, reliance on volatile global markets, and insufficient regional energy integration. The findings revealed that the war exacerbated fuel inflation, strained national budgets, and exposed the fragility of West Africa‘s energy systems. To mitigate future risks, the paper recommends accelerating renewable energy adoption, expanding regional refining capabilities, and strengthening the West African Power Pool (WAPP) to enhance energy resilience. These measures are critical for reducing ECOWAS's exposure to external shocks and ensuring long-term energy security.

Ahmad (2026) analyses World Power Re-Configuration after the 2026 Iran–Israel War argue that the 2026 Iran–Israel war represents a systemic geopolitical rupture that reshapes global power structures. This study examines how the conflict affects power distribution, alliance patterns, and geoeconomic dynamics. Using a qualitative geopolitical approach, it integrates neorealism, power transition theory, geoeconomics, and complex interdependence, based on analysis of official documents, UN debates, and policy reports. The findings show the collapse of regional balance, the emergence of three power blocs (Western, Eurasian, and fragmented Global South), and intensified geoeconomic fragmentation through energy disruption and de-dollarisation trends. The study also highlights the decline of the liberal international order and the rise of hybrid warfare. It proposes the concept of “post-liberal fragmented multipolarity” to explain the current unstable

global system. Yange and Erighe (2025) analyse the Iran–Israel war and its implications for Nigeria's strategic interests, showing how a geographically distant conflict can influence the country's economy, diplomacy, security, and ideology. Using secondary data and a qualitative analytical method, it applies Neo-realist and Neo-liberal theories to explore how the anarchic international system, power politics, and cooperation potential shape Nigeria's responses. Findings reveal that the war's effects extend far beyond the Middle East, presenting both challenges and opportunities for Nigeria. Economically, instability in the region raises global oil prices, potentially boosting Nigeria's short-term revenues. However, such volatility threatens macroeconomic stability, fuels inflation, and complicates fiscal planning. Diplomatically, Nigeria must navigate delicate relations with global powers and regional actors, while security risks include heightened extremist propaganda and transnational threats. This study is distinct from prior research by integrating Nigeria's economic, diplomatic, security, and ideological vulnerabilities into a unified framework, while linking oil price shocks directly to macroeconomic planning and inflation, an often-overlooked dimension. The dual-lens use of Neo-realism and Neo-liberalism highlights both competitive power struggles and opportunities for cooperation, offering a nuanced understanding of Nigeria's positioning in the global system. The paper concludes that Nigeria must reduce dependence on oil to mitigate risks from conflict-driven price shocks. It recommends diversifying into agriculture, manufacturing, and renewable energy to strengthen economic resilience and ensure stability during geopolitical crises.

Lee (2026) examines the historical roots of the 2026 U.S.–Israel military action against Iran by analysing the long-term geopolitical, ideological, and strategic developments that have shaped relations among these states. The research synthesises credible online academic sources to trace the evolution of U.S.–Israel strategic cooperation, Iran's post-1979 revolutionary foreign policy, and the broader regional security dynamics of the Middle East. By situating the 2026 military confrontation within its historical context, the study highlights how earlier diplomatic alliances, ideological rivalries, and regional power struggles contributed to escalating tensions. The findings suggested that the 2026 conflict cannot be understood as an isolated event but rather as the outcome of decades of political mistrust, security competition, and shifting strategic alignments. Understanding these historical foundations provides deeper insight into contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics and the persistent volatility of U.S.–Iran and Israel–Iran relations.

Steinberg (2021) examines the axis of resistance argue that since 2011 the Islamic Republic of Iran has significantly extended its influence in the Middle East. The expansion reached its apex in 2018. It has since entered a new phase in which Tehran, despite not suffering any strategic military setbacks, is hitting a wall. Iran's biggest fundamental problem is that a majority of its allies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen are primarily military and terrorist actors. They frequently succeed in armed confrontations. Yet they are subsequently incapable of ensuring political and economic stability. The best option for German and European policymakers is a strategy of containment so as to put an end to Iran's expansion in the four countries mentioned above, but also to acknowledge in the short term that Tehran and its allies are in a position of strength. Part of such a containment strategy would be to impose the most far-reaching isolation and sanctions possible on Iran's armed partners. This includes adding Lebanese Hezbollah, the Hezbollah Battalions, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haqq and other militias loyal to Iran, including their leaders, to all relevant terrorism lists. Should Iranian institutions and actors involved in its policy of expansion in the Middle East also be listed as terrorists? The close ties between the Quds Corps-which is in charge of Iran's policy towards its Arab neighbours-and unequivocally terrorist organisations such as Lebanese Hezbollah suggest that this step is necessary. All rights reserved.

Otubu et al. (2024) examined the United States-Iran conflict and how it would affect Middle East security. This study used a historical research design, and the trend analysis technique was used to analyse the data. It was determined that the exploratory and qualitative trend analysis technique was appropriate for the type of study. This study was based on Zagare's (1996) deterrence theory, which was seen as a re-evaluation of the traditional balance of power theory. Findings showed that the core reasons for the dispute between the United States and Iran were U.S. foreign policy, the failed extreme pressure strategy of the Biden and Trump administrations, state behaviour in the global order, innovation, domestic politics, and control and deterrence. The conflict between the United States and Iran has undermined regional security and peace. The main causes of the sanctions' futility against the Islamic Republic of Iran include Iran's economic diversification, its technological advancements, its nuclear program, its geopolitical location, people's support for the system as well as political engagement, the continued implementation of Iran's regional policies, political countermeasures, and other countries' lack of political support following Trump's decision to withdraw from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The Middle East's security was viewed as being threatened by Iran's nuclear program by the United States, Israel, and other countries in the region. The study concluded that, despite the two states' numerous problems and obstacles impeding their attempts to normalise, opportunities and hopes have always existed. The study concluded that despite their ongoing hostility and tense relationship, both nations occasionally communicate because it is in their specific national security goals. Therefore, the study suggested, among other things, that to prevent the United States from isolating itself from significant actors in the Middle East, the country should work to restore relations with Iran and discover productive means of resolving disagreements, starting with a return to full adherence to the JCPOA for both parties. Gottelan (2024) examines the Escalation of the Iran-Israel conflict: The Significance for Africa argue that, after a short exposition of the Iran-Israel proxy war before 7 October 2023 and between then and April 2024, this article researches their consequences on historically contextualised Iranian-, Israeli- and Palestinian-African relations, exemplifying both African and Israeli ambivalent stances towards the other party. On the whole, it has been found that Israeli partnerships and alliances on the continent have been strained but have mostly held in the period considered despite the proxy war, while the position of hostile African nations has been further entrenched. The difficulties of Israel with international justice have been partly the result of efforts from the latter, enhancing their standing on the international stage rather than the continent's. Reactions have been mild and/or discreet to the proxy war beyond the Palestinian theatre, including Lebanon, Syria and Yemen. That is despite the huge impact of the related Red Sea crisis on the continent, especially in Egypt, Somalia and Sudan. The larger proxy war has, however, allowed for a series of diplomatic successes on the part of Iran. The consequences of the proxy war on African public opinion and perceptions are the subject of further enquiry.

Yhdego (2026). Examines a Systems-Theoretical Analysis of the Iran-US- Israel Conflict: The Consequences of War without Winners, applying social systems theory and war systems to analyse the current military confrontation between Iran, the United States and Israel that erupted in February–March 2026. Drawing on the theoretical framework developed in Harste's account of "society's war" and his subsequent analyses of self-referential conflict systems, the article argues that the current conflict represents a paradigmatic case of war that has become "war about war": a self-referential system operating according to its own internal logic rather than external political goals. Through adductive reasoning, it demonstrates how structural couplings between military, political and media systems have produced a conflict dynamic in which rational communication between belligerents has become effectively impossible and in which the concept of "victory" has

lost operational meaning. The consequences, as predicted by systems theory, are not the triumph of one side but cumulative damage and mutual exhaustion, with cascading effects throughout regional and global systems. The article concludes by examining the role of United States support for what critics have described as Israel's most dangerous leadership, arguing that this relationship exemplifies dysfunctional structural couplings that perpetuate rather than resolve conflict.

Maher (2019) analyses Balancing Deterrence: Iran-Israel Relations in a Turbulent Middle East, examining the regional dynamics that further consolidated Israel's national security in the Middle East in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, reflecting upon the nuclear challenge between Iran and Israel and Iran's expanding activities in the region. Design/methodology/approach – To prove the central argument, the study uses a conceptual framework that centres on deterrence as the main approach used by states to consolidate their influence in the Middle East region. Findings – Iran's nuclear progress and influence in the region have strengthened Israel's security and fostered an unprecedented open rapprochement led by USA efforts with the Gulf regimes. Originality/value – The study draws particular attention to the Iran–Israel nuclear competency, and the Israeli preferred policy options regarding Iranian activities in the region amid a turbulent Middle East. In addition, the paper offers insight into the regional dynamics that further consolidated Israel's national security in the region while maintaining a status of Arab vulnerability and backwardness.

Baltacı (2022) analyse Iran Israel Conflict: An Overview of the Situation after the Iran Islamic Revolution from the Framework of Security Theories, argue that the Middle East geography, where the remnants of 20th-century problems are becoming more and more visible with each passing day, is one of the most critical conflict zones in the world. Although most conflicts in the region stem from border disputes, conflicts can also occur between states that do not have a common border. States such as Israel and Iran, which strive to become a regional hegemonic power, can also have conflicts. Moreover, these conflicts are sometimes implemented directly and sometimes through proxies. In this study, the conflicts between Iran and Israel after the Iranian Islamic Revolution are examined theoretically.

Ebute (2026) analyse the Economic and Diplomatic Implications of the 2026 U.S, Israel & Iran War: Defining Victory in a Multi-Dimensional Conflict, provides a comprehensive analysis of the mobilisation of economic and diplomatic consequences of the 2026 United States-Israel-Iran conflict. It puts the crisis in the context of the overall scenario of international relations and energy geopolitics in modern international relations. This war, with its starting point being joint military operations targeting the network of Iranian nuclear and strategic facilities and then widely followed by a series of retaliatory steps, is a sharp escalation of long-standing geopolitical frustrations based on security concerns, ideological differences, and the balance of power. This paper, drawing on complementary lenses of Realism and Energy Security Theory, analyses the strategic reasons for the war and its multiple global consequences.

Materials and Methods

The study employed a historical research design and applied secondary sources of data. Data were sourced from academic books, journal articles, government documents, policy papers, newspapers, and reliable online publications. The data obtained were analysed through qualitative content analysis, which involved reviewing, interpreting, and organising relevant information thematically according to the study's objectives.

Results and Discussion

History and Overview of Iran-Israel Crisis

The 1979 Iranian Revolution represents the most important turning point in influencing long-term hostility between Iran and both the United States and Israel. Before the revolution, Iran maintained pragmatic relations with Israel and cooperated with Western powers for strategic and economic reasons. However, the establishment of an Islamic Republic introduced an ideological foreign policy framework that emphasised resistance to Western influence and opposition to Israel (Parsi, 2007; Sobhani, 1989). The literature consistently identifies revolutionary ideology as a foundational factor influencing Iran's later geopolitical stance. The revolutionary government reframed Iran's national identity around anti-imperialism and regional resistance. This ideological orientation led to the severing of diplomatic ties with Israel and a deterioration of relations with the United States. These developments established a structural framework of antagonism that persisted for decades and influenced subsequent regional conflicts (Garoupa & Spruk, 2025). The qualitative evidence suggests that the revolution created long-term strategic mistrust among the three actors involved. Historical studies demonstrate that the revolutionary shift not only altered diplomatic relations but also reconfigured regional power dynamics in the Middle East. Iran's efforts to position itself as a leading force opposing Western influence contributed to the emergence of competing geopolitical blocs. These developments intensified security concerns among both Israel and the United States, laying the historical groundwork for recurring tensions and eventual military confrontation (Lee, 2021; Britannica, 2026).

The strategic alliance between the United States and Israel has been a central pillar of Middle Eastern security politics. Historical records show that military cooperation, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic coordination strengthened significantly during the late twentieth century. These developments created a long-term partnership aimed at maintaining regional stability and countering perceived threats from rival states (Brown, 2007). The alliance gradually expanded beyond bilateral defence cooperation into regional security initiatives. Scholars emphasise that U.S. support for Israel's security interests became deeply embedded in American foreign policy, particularly as Iran's influence expanded in the Middle East. This strategic alignment contributed to a shared perception of Iran as a major geopolitical challenge, reinforcing policy coordination between the two States (Krasner, 1999). The alliance also influenced diplomatic narratives and security discourse. Political rhetoric and policy frameworks frequently framed Iran's activities as threats to regional stability and international security. This narrative strengthened cooperation between Washington and Tel Aviv, contributing to coordinated responses to Iran's actions (Lee, 2022). The U.S.–Israel alliance played a significant role in shaping the strategic environment that eventually led to the 2026 military action

Contemporary scholarship reveals that Iran's growing regional influence has been a major factor shaping geopolitical tensions in the Middle East. Since the early twenty-first century, Iran has expanded its political and strategic engagement across the region through diplomatic alliances and ideological networks. Scholars argue that these developments increased Iran's visibility and influence in regional politics, prompting heightened concern among rival states (Ali et al., 2025). Further evidence from the literature suggests that Iran's regional activities were often interpreted by external actors as attempts to reshape the balance of power in the Middle East. Strategic partnerships with various regional actors enabled Iran to strengthen its geopolitical position while projecting influence beyond its borders. Analysts note that these developments intensified rivalry with Israel and complicated U.S. foreign policy objectives in the region (Parsi, 2007). Additional synthesis of scholarly perspectives indicates that Iran's expanding regional role also contributed

to evolving security perceptions among neighbouring States. Concerns regarding Iran's strategic ambitions led to increased military preparedness and stronger alliances among States seeking to counter-balance Iranian influence. These developments reinforced an environment of competition and mistrust that persisted for decades (Lee, 2023). Iran's regional strategy played a crucial role in shaping the pathway toward confrontation.

The synthesis of historical and contemporary research highlights the presence of a persistent security dilemma in the Middle East. Security dilemmas arise when actions taken by one state to enhance its own security are interpreted as threats by others, leading to escalating cycles of military preparation. Scholars argue that this dynamic has characterised relations among Iran, Israel, and the United States for decades (Krasner, 1999). The qualitative data reveal recurring patterns of military buildup and strategic deterrence. Further analysis of the literature indicates that perceived threats associated with Iran's strategic capabilities contributed to intensified military planning by both Israel and the United States. These responses were framed as defensive measures aimed at preserving regional stability. However, such actions simultaneously reinforced Iran's perception of external hostility, further deepening tensions among the actors involved (Ali et al., 2025). Additionally, the accumulation of these security responses over time produced a volatile regional environment. As mutual distrust increased, opportunities for diplomatic engagement diminished and the likelihood of confrontation grew. Scholars emphasise that long-term security dilemmas can gradually escalate into direct military actions when political tensions reach critical levels (Lee, 2022). These patterns help explain the strategic environment preceding the 2026 conflict.

Analysing the Iran-Israel crisis using the Balance of Threat Theory

The Iran-Israel crisis can be understood through Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat Theory, which holds that States respond to perceived threats rather than power alone. Threat perception is influenced by military capability, geographical proximity, offensive strength, and perceived intentions (Walt, 1987). The theory therefore helps explain the growing hostility between Iran and Israel and the increasing involvement of the United States. Israel's perception of Iran as a major threat has been influenced by Iran's nuclear programme, missile and drone capabilities, and regional influence. SIPRI estimated that Israel possessed about 90 nuclear warheads, while Iran was not classified as a nuclear-armed State (SIPRI, 2024). Israel has consequently sought to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons and to weaken its military capabilities. Military expenditure also reflects the imbalance between the two states. In 2024, Israel spent approximately $46.5 billion on defence, compared with Iran's $7.9 billion (SIPRI, 2025). Despite Israel's greater conventional military capacity, Iran has relied on missiles, drones, asymmetric strategies, and regional partnerships to strengthen its deterrence.

From Iran's perspective, Israel's military superiority and close alliance with the United States constitute significant security threats. Iran has therefore attempted to strengthen its strategic position through missile development, nuclear capabilities, and regional alliances. The direct involvement of the United States has further intensified Tehran's perception of threat and contributed to the continuing security dilemma between the two countries.

The 2026 conflict further demonstrated this process of threat perception and counter-balancing. U.S. and Israeli military operations targeted Iran's nuclear and military capabilities, while Iran retained important missile, drone, and nuclear-related capacities. Carnegie Endowment reported that Iran retained an estimated 400-kilogram stockpile of highly enriched uranium, demonstrating that military action had not eliminated its strategic capabilities (Carnegie Endowment, 2026). The

conflict also affected the strategically important Strait of Hormuz, where oil flows reportedly declined from about 20 million barrels per day to 5 million barrels per day (Reuters, 2026).

In all, Balance of Threat Theory explains the crisis as a cycle of threat perception, balancing, and counter-balancing. Israel's concerns about Iran have encouraged preventive military action and reliance on U.S. support, while Iran's perception of Israel and the United States as threats has encouraged stronger military and strategic responses. The crisis has therefore been sustained not only by differences in military power but also by the way both states interpret each other's capabilities, intentions, and alliances.

Conclusion

The Iran-Israel crisis illustrates the usefulness of Stephen Walt's Balance of Threat Theory in understanding interstate rivalry and security competition. The theory explains that Iran and Israel reacted not merely to each other's military capabilities but also to perceived intentions, offensive strength, geographical proximity, and strategic alliances. Israel's concerns over Iran's nuclear and military capabilities contributed to stronger cooperation with the United States, while Iran sought to enhance its security through military development and regional partnerships. These actions created a continuous cycle of threat perception and counter-responses. Thus, the crisis extended beyond competition for military superiority and reflected a security dilemma in which each side interpreted the other's actions as a threat. Balance of Threat Theory therefore provided a useful basis for explaining the persistence of the conflict and its consequences for peace and stability in the Middle East.

Recommendations

The study recommended the following:

1. Iran, Israel, and other major players should intensify diplomatic negotiations and confidence-building measures to reduce tensions, prevent miscalculation, and address concerns over nuclear and military activities.
2. Regional States and major powers should establish stronger security mechanisms for dialogue, conflict prevention, and crisis management to reduce the cycle of threat perception and military counter-balancing in the Middle East.

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