

Conflict-Ridden Middle East Asia: Historical Roots and Contemporary Military Realities

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Preface

The Middle East has long remained one of the world's most strategically significant yet conflict-prone regions. Its geopolitical importance, vast energy resources, complex historical legacies, religious diversity, and competing regional and global interests have shaped an environment marked by recurring conflicts and evolving security challenges. In recent decades, the nature of warfare in the region has undergone a profound transformation, with conventional military confrontations increasingly intertwined with proxy wars, cyber operations, terrorism, maritime disputes, drone warfare, and humanitarian crises. These developments have far-reaching implications not only for the Middle East but also for Asia and the broader international community.

*The edited volume *Conflict Ridden Middle East Asia: Historical Roots and Contemporary Military Realities* seeks to provide a comprehensive and interdisciplinary understanding of these multifaceted issues. By bringing together contributions from scholars, researchers, and practitioners across the fields of international relations, political science, strategic studies, law, and security studies, this book offers valuable insights into the historical foundations of regional conflicts and the contemporary military realities that continue to shape global geopolitics.*

The chapters in this volume examine a wide spectrum of critical themes. They explore the legal and geopolitical dimensions of maritime disputes in the Middle East, particularly in relation to the Law of the Sea, and assess the challenges posed by refugee protection and humanitarian law amid ongoing armed conflicts. The volume critically analyzes the implementation of International Humanitarian Law in safeguarding civilian populations during modern warfare while also examining the tensions between state sovereignty, foreign military intervention, and international legal norms.

Recognizing the rapidly changing strategic environment, the book further addresses emerging security challenges confronting the Middle East and Asia.

Special attention is devoted to India's growing strategic engagement with the region, highlighting both opportunities for cooperation and the diplomatic, economic, and security challenges involved. The enduring Iran–Saudi Arabia rivalry is examined as a defining factor influencing regional stability, sectarian politics, and international alliances. Additionally, the volume investigates the growing strategic importance of the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, where military tensions, the proliferation of sophisticated drone technology, and threats to global energy security underscore the interconnected nature of regional conflicts and international economic stability.

This book is intended to serve as a valuable academic resource for students, researchers, policymakers, diplomats, military professionals, and anyone interested in understanding the complex dynamics of the Middle East and its strategic relevance to Asia and the world. It is our hope that the discussions presented in this volume will encourage informed debate, stimulate further scholarly inquiry, and contribute to a deeper appreciation of the intricate relationship between history, law, geopolitics, and security in one of the most consequential regions of the twenty-first century.

We express our sincere gratitude to all the contributing authors for their scholarly efforts and commitment to excellence. We also thank the reviewers, editorial team, and the publisher for their invaluable support throughout the preparation of this volume. It is our sincere hope that this book will make a meaningful contribution to the growing body of literature on Middle Eastern geopolitics, international security, and contemporary military affairs.

Editors

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Table of Content

Sl. No.	Title and Authors	Page No.
1	Maritime Disputes and the Law of the Sea in Middle Eastern Geopolitics <i>Purbita Das</i>	01 - 07
2	Refugee Protection and Humanitarian Law in Contemporary Conflicts <i>Purbita Das</i>	08 - 17
3	International Humanitarian Law and Armed Conflicts in the Middle East: Assessing Civilian Protection in Contemporary Warfare <i>Mr. Subham Chatterjee</i>	18 - 24
4	State Sovereignty, Foreign Military Intervention and International Law in the Middle East: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Conflicts <i>Mr. Subham Chatterjee</i>	25 - 32
5	Future Security Challenges in the Middle East and Asia <i>Baviskar Rajshri Namdeo</i>	33 - 40
6	India's Strategic Role in the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges <i>Vinayak Ramesh Sapkal</i> <i>Dr. Upendra Dhagdhage</i>	41 - 48
7	Iran-Saudi Arabia Rivalry <i>Khushal Kamlakar Kulkarni, Dr. Upendra Dhagdhage</i>	49 - 53
8	Bab-el-Mandeb Military Conflict in the Strait: The Spread of Sophisticated Drone Technology and the Challenge of Global Energy Security <i>Dr. U. J. Dhagdhage</i>	54 - 61
9	Geo-Politics Study of West Asia and the Middle East Asia <i>Dr. Sandip S. Bhavsar, Dr. Rupesh R. Deore</i>	62 - 78

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Maritime Disputes and the Law of the Sea in Middle Eastern Geopolitics

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Abstract

Maritime disputes in the Middle East constitute a critical intersection of international law, geopolitics, and resource competition, reflecting both historical legacies and contemporary strategic rivalries. This article examines the legal framework governing maritime claims under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea and evaluates its practical application within the politically volatile Middle Eastern region. Particular emphasis is placed on disputes in the Persian Gulf, the Eastern Mediterranean, and key strategic chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz, all of which hold immense geopolitical and economic significance due to their role in global energy transportation and security.

The study highlights how overlapping territorial claims, unresolved colonial-era boundaries, and intensified competition over hydrocarbon resources contribute to a complex and often contested legal landscape. It further explores the role of international adjudicatory mechanisms, including the International Court of Justice and arbitral tribunals, alongside the continuing relevance of customary international law in shaping state conduct. Importantly, the analysis underscores how power politics and regional rivalries frequently override or undermine formal legal processes.

The article argues that while UNCLOS provides a comprehensive and structured legal regime for maritime governance, its effectiveness in the Middle East remains constrained by selective ratification, divergent interpretations of legal norms, and significant enforcement limitations. In light of these challenges, a nuanced and region-specific approach is essential—one that harmonizes legal principles with geopolitical realities and promotes cooperative frameworks for sustainable maritime governance.

Keywords: Maritime disputes, UNCLOS, Middle East geopolitics, Exclusive Economic Zone, Strait of Hormuz

Introduction

Maritime disputes arise from competing claims over territorial seas, continental shelves, and Exclusive Economic Zones, often involving access to valuable natural resources and control over strategic waterways. In the Middle East, such disputes are particularly acute due to the convergence of historical ambiguities, colonial legacies, and the presence of vast hydrocarbon reserves beneath maritime zones. The legacy of imprecise boundary demarcations during the colonial era has left several maritime boundaries unresolved, thereby intensifying contemporary legal and political contestations.

Moreover, the legal complexities surrounding maritime delimitation are further aggravated by the region's unique geographical and geopolitical characteristics. The Middle East encompasses semi-enclosed seas and narrow waterways, where coastal states are in close proximity, resulting in overlapping claims and competing interpretations of international maritime law. The discovery and exploitation of offshore oil and gas resources have significantly heightened the stakes, transforming legal disputes into matters of economic survival and national security.

The region's maritime geography—spanning the Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean—renders it central to global trade and energy security, with critical shipping routes facilitating the movement of a substantial portion of the world's oil and gas supplies. Consequently, disputes in these waters are not merely legal conflicts but also geopolitical flashpoints, often involving external powers and strategic alliances. As a result, maritime disputes in the Middle East exemplify the intricate interplay between legal norms and geopolitical interests, necessitating carefully calibrated legal and diplomatic responses.

The Legal Framework: Law of the Sea

The modern law governing maritime disputes is primarily codified in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982, which establishes a comprehensive legal framework regulating the use and governance of the world's oceans. UNCLOS delineates maritime zones and defines the rights and obligations of coastal and maritime states, thereby providing a structured basis for resolving disputes. Under its provisions, coastal states are entitled to a 12 nautical mile territorial sea, within which they exercise full sovereignty, subject to the right of innocent passage. Beyond this lies the 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zone, where states possess sovereign rights for the purpose of exploring, exploiting, conserving, and managing natural resources.

Additionally, UNCLOS recognizes rights over the continental shelf, allowing states to exploit seabed resources even beyond the EEZ under certain conditions. The Convention also establishes mechanisms for peaceful dispute resolution, including

adjudication before the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, arbitration tribunals, and recourse to the International Court of Justice. These institutional frameworks are designed to ensure uniform interpretation and application of maritime law.

However, the effectiveness of UNCLOS in the Middle Eastern context remains limited. Not all regional states have ratified the Convention, and some key actors prefer to rely on customary international law or adopt selective interpretations of UNCLOS provisions. This fragmented adherence undermines legal uniformity and complicates dispute settlement, particularly in regions marked by overlapping claims and geopolitical tensions.

Historical Roots of Maritime Disputes

Many maritime disputes in the Middle East can be traced to poorly defined territorial boundaries established during the colonial era. European imperial powers often drew boundaries with limited regard for geographic realities, indigenous patterns of habitation, or future resource implications. As a result, several maritime frontiers remained ambiguous or entirely undemarcated at the time of decolonization. This lack of clarity became particularly problematic in the Persian Gulf, where coastal states are situated in close proximity and where even minor variations in boundary interpretation can significantly affect maritime entitlements.

Prior to the discovery of oil, these ambiguities carried relatively little economic or political consequence, as maritime zones were not perceived as valuable assets. However, the emergence of oil exploration and production in the early twentieth century fundamentally altered this dynamic. The granting of oil concessions by colonial authorities and newly independent states intensified the need for clearly defined maritime boundaries. What had once been fluid and informally regulated spaces used by tribal communities for fishing and navigation were transformed into zones of strategic and economic importance.

Consequently, states began to assert rigid territorial and maritime claims, often overlapping with those of neighboring countries. The shift from customary, flexible arrangements to formalized state-centric claims contributed to heightened tensions and disputes. In this context, the legacy of colonial boundary-making continues to shape contemporary maritime conflicts, underscoring the enduring impact of historical processes on present-day legal and geopolitical challenges in the Middle East.

Key Maritime Disputes in the Region

- **Persian Gulf Disputes**

The Persian Gulf remains one of the most intensely contested maritime regions in the world, owing to a combination of legal, geopolitical, and economic factors. Disputes frequently arise from overlapping Exclusive Economic Zone claims,

which are complicated by the Gulf's semi-enclosed geography and the close proximity of coastal states. The presence of vast offshore oil and gas reserves further heightens tensions, as control over maritime zones directly translates into economic and strategic advantage. Additionally, sovereignty disputes over islands—such as those involving Iran and certain Gulf states—exacerbate legal uncertainties. The absence of clearly defined land boundaries often extends into maritime ambiguity, making delimitation processes legally complex and politically sensitive.

- **The Strait of Hormuz**

The Strait of Hormuz constitutes one of the world's most critical maritime chokepoints, facilitating the transit of a significant proportion of global oil shipments. Geographically situated between Iran and Oman, the strait falls within their territorial waters but is subject to international maritime law, particularly the regime of transit passage under UNCLOS. Legal controversies frequently emerge regarding the extent of navigational freedoms, the legality of military deployments, and attempts by coastal states to regulate or restrict passage. Although UNCLOS guarantees the right of transit passage, ensuring unimpeded navigation, its interpretation remains contested in practice.

- **Eastern Mediterranean Disputes**

In the Eastern Mediterranean, disputes involving Turkey, Cyprus, Israel, and Greece center on the delimitation of EEZs, exploration of offshore gas resources, and differing interpretations of the legal status of islands. These conflicts underscore the persistent tension between established legal principles and broader geopolitical interests, often resulting in prolonged diplomatic stalemates.

Legal Challenges in Application

- **Persian Gulf Disputes**

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- **Geopolitical Dimensions**

Maritime disputes in the Middle East cannot be understood purely in legal terms, as they are deeply embedded within broader geopolitical dynamics that shape state behavior and regional security architectures. These disputes are closely intertwined with longstanding strategic rivalries, particularly between Iran and Arab Gulf states, where maritime zones often become arenas for projecting power and asserting regional influence. Such rivalries frequently extend beyond legal claims, manifesting in military posturing, naval exercises, and occasional confrontations at sea.

Energy security concerns further intensify these disputes, given that the Middle East remains a critical hub for global oil and gas supplies. Control over maritime routes and offshore resources is thus not merely a matter of legal entitlement but of economic survival and geopolitical leverage. Disruptions in key chokepoints can significantly affect global energy markets, underscoring the strategic importance of secure sea lanes. As a result, maritime disputes often escalate into broader security concerns with global implications.

External interventions by major powers such as the United States and China add another layer of complexity. These actors maintain a significant naval presence in the region to safeguard trade routes, secure energy flows, and advance their strategic interests. While such involvement may contribute to stability in some instances, it can also heighten tensions and contribute to an arms buildup.

The increasing militarization of maritime zones, including the deployment of advanced naval assets, drones, and missile systems, further complicates dispute resolution. In this context, legal mechanisms are frequently overshadowed by

strategic considerations, making peaceful and law-based resolution more challenging.

Dispute Resolution Mechanisms

International law provides a range of institutional mechanisms for the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes, reflecting the broader commitment of the international community to the rule of law in ocean governance. Among the principal forums is the International Court of Justice, which adjudicates disputes between states on the basis of international law and has contributed significantly to the development of maritime delimitation principles. Similarly, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, established under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, offers a specialized forum with expertise in maritime matters, including prompt release cases and disputes concerning the interpretation and application of UNCLOS provisions.

In addition to judicial bodies, arbitration under UNCLOS Annex VII provides a flexible and widely accessible mechanism for dispute resolution, allowing states to constitute ad hoc tribunals tailored to the specific dispute. This method has been particularly significant in cases where parties seek neutrality and procedural autonomy.

Despite the availability of these mechanisms, states in the Middle East often exhibit reluctance to submit disputes to formal legal adjudication. Political sensitivities, particularly those involving sovereignty, territorial integrity, and control over natural resources, discourage reliance on third-party dispute settlement. Instead, states frequently prefer bilateral or multilateral negotiations, which allow for greater diplomatic flexibility and preserve strategic interests. Consequently, while international legal mechanisms remain vital in principle, their practical utilization in the region is limited, reflecting the enduring primacy of political considerations over juridical solutions.

Conclusion

Maritime disputes in the Middle East represent a complex interplay between legal principles and geopolitical realities, where formal norms often intersect with strategic interests and power dynamics. While the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea provides a comprehensive and structured legal framework for the regulation of maritime zones and dispute settlement, its practical effectiveness in the region remains constrained. This limitation arises from inconsistent adherence by regional actors, the persistence of historical ambiguities rooted in colonial boundary-making, and ongoing strategic rivalries that shape state behavior.

The deeply entrenched nature of sovereignty claims, coupled with the economic significance of offshore hydrocarbon resources, often leads states to prioritize national interests over legal compliance. In this context, legal mechanisms alone are insufficient to ensure durable solutions. A sustainable approach to resolving

maritime disputes in the Middle East requires enhanced regional cooperation, including confidence-building measures and dialogue-oriented frameworks that encourage mutual understanding and compromise. Strengthening legal institutions—both at the international and regional levels—is equally essential to promote consistency, predictability, and legitimacy in dispute resolution processes. Furthermore, there is a pressing need to integrate legal norms with geopolitical realities, recognizing that law must operate within a broader strategic environment. Ultimately, the future of maritime governance in the Middle East depends on the ability of states to reconcile rigid sovereignty claims with shared interests in regional stability, secure navigation, and the equitable management of marine resources. Such a balanced approach offers the most viable pathway toward long-term peace and cooperation.

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Refugee Protection and Humanitarian Law in Contemporary Conflicts

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Abstract

Contemporary armed conflicts have generated unprecedented levels of forced displacement, making refugee protection one of the most pressing challenges in international law. The increasing complexity of modern conflicts including protracted civil wars, transnational terrorism, ethnic persecution, proxy warfare, and emerging factors such as climate-induced displacement has significantly strained traditional legal frameworks governing refugees and humanitarian protection. In response, three core legal regimes International Humanitarian Law, International Refugee Law, and International Human Rights Law operate in a complementary manner to safeguard the rights and dignity of displaced populations during and after armed conflicts.

Despite the existence of these robust normative frameworks, serious challenges persist in their implementation. Restrictive state practices, border securitization, erosion of asylum principles, and the growing politicization of migration have weakened the effectiveness of refugee protection mechanisms. This article critically examines the evolving legal architecture governing refugee protection, with particular emphasis on the interplay between IHL and IRL. It evaluates key legal instruments, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, the 1949 Geneva Conventions, regional refugee frameworks, and the institutional role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Furthermore, the article analyzes contemporary humanitarian crises—such as the Syrian civil war, the Rohingya displacement, and the Russia–Ukraine conflict—to assess the adequacy and limitations of existing legal responses. It argues that meaningful protection requires enhanced international cooperation, equitable

burden-sharing, and a reformed, rights-based humanitarian governance framework capable of addressing the realities of modern displacement.

Keywords: Refugee Protection; International Humanitarian Law; Armed Conflict; Forced Displacement; Human Rights

Introduction

The twenty-first century has witnessed a dramatic increase in forced displacement resulting from armed conflicts, persecution, terrorism, and political instability. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, millions of individuals worldwide are forcibly displaced due to violence and humanitarian crises. Refugees often face grave threats including persecution, statelessness, human trafficking, denial of basic rights, and prolonged displacement. Contemporary conflicts have significantly transformed the nature of refugee movements, making refugee protection a central concern of international humanitarian governance.

International law addresses refugee protection primarily through two interconnected legal regimes: International Refugee Law and International Humanitarian Law. While refugee law governs the legal status and rights of refugees, humanitarian law regulates conduct during armed conflicts and seeks to protect civilians affected by war. In practice, these legal systems frequently overlap in contemporary conflict situations.

The legal framework for refugee protection emerged prominently after the Second World War with the adoption of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Simultaneously, the Geneva Conventions of 1949 established humanitarian protections for civilians during armed conflict. However, evolving patterns of violence—including internal conflicts, non-state armed groups, cyber warfare, and climate-induced migration—have exposed limitations in traditional legal approaches.

This article critically examines refugee protection within the framework of humanitarian law in contemporary conflicts. It analyzes the normative foundations, institutional mechanisms, practical challenges, and emerging developments shaping refugee governance in the modern era.

Legal Framework of Refugee Protection

The 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol

The cornerstone of international refugee law is the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951, complemented by its 1967 Protocol, which removed the temporal and geographic limitations of the original instrument and universalized its application. Together, these legal frameworks establish the foundational definition of a refugee and articulate a comprehensive set of minimum standards for their treatment. A refugee is generally understood as a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a

particular social group, or political opinion, is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of the protection of their country of origin.

Central to this regime is the principle of non-refoulement under Article 33 of the Convention, which prohibits states from returning or expelling a refugee to territories where their life or freedom would be threatened. This principle is widely recognized as the “cornerstone” of refugee protection and has attained the status of customary international law, thereby binding even non-party states under general international legal obligations. It functions as a critical safeguard against forced return to persecution, torture, or other forms of serious harm.

In addition to non-refoulement, the Convention provides several essential rights aimed at ensuring dignity and legal security for refugees. These include access to courts, enabling refugees to seek legal remedies and due process protections in host states. The right to work ensures economic self-sufficiency and reduces dependency on humanitarian assistance, while access to education guarantees long-term integration prospects and human development. Furthermore, access to public relief and social assistance ensures that refugees are not excluded from basic welfare protections.

Collectively, these rights reflect the Convention’s broader humanitarian purpose: to balance state sovereignty with the imperative of protecting individuals fleeing persecution, thereby embedding refugee protection within the framework of international human rights law.

Regional Refugee Instruments

Regional refugee protection frameworks play a crucial supplementary role in strengthening and contextualizing the global regime established under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Recognizing that the nature of displacement in certain regions often extends beyond individualized persecution, regional instruments in Africa and Latin America have adopted broader, more flexible definitions of “refugee” to respond effectively to large-scale humanitarian crises.

The 1969 OAU Convention Governing Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa represents a landmark development in this regard. It expands the definition of a refugee to include not only individuals fleeing persecution on conventional grounds but also those compelled to leave their countries due to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination, or events seriously disturbing public order. This broader formulation is particularly significant in the African context, where post-colonial conflicts, civil wars, and widespread instability have frequently generated mass displacement. By incorporating “generalized violence” and public disorder as valid grounds for refugee status, the OAU Convention reflects a realistic understanding of forced migration dynamics in conflict-prone regions.

Similarly, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, adopted in Latin America, further broadens refugee protection by including persons fleeing generalized violence, internal armed conflicts, massive human rights violations, and serious disturbances of public order. Although not legally binding in the same manner as a treaty, the Cartagena framework has exerted strong normative influence across Latin American asylum systems, shaping domestic legislation and regional cooperation practices.

Together, these instruments demonstrate a more pragmatic and humanitarian-oriented approach compared to the narrower individualized persecution model of the 1951 Convention. They acknowledge that modern displacement is often collective, conflict-driven, and structural in nature. Consequently, regional frameworks enhance protection by filling normative gaps, promoting solidarity, and ensuring more inclusive responses to complex humanitarian emergencies.

International Humanitarian Law and Forced Displacement

International Humanitarian Law, particularly the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977, constitutes the core legal framework governing the conduct of armed conflict and the protection of persons who are not, or are no longer, participating in hostilities. Although IHL does not specifically define or regulate “refugees” as a legal category, it plays a decisive role in preventing and mitigating the circumstances that lead to forced displacement.

A foundational principle of IHL is the principle of distinction, which requires parties to a conflict to differentiate at all times between civilians and combatants, and between civilian objects and military objectives. This principle is essential in minimizing civilian harm and reducing displacement caused by indiscriminate or unlawful attacks. Closely related is the prohibition of forced displacement, which allows evacuation of civilians only when required for their security or for imperative military reasons, and even then, such displacement must be temporary and conducted under humane conditions.

IHL further ensures the protection of civilians in occupied territories, imposing strict obligations on occupying powers to maintain public order, provide essential services, and respect the dignity and rights of the civilian population. In addition, it mandates the humane treatment of displaced persons, prohibiting violence, coercion, collective punishment, and degrading treatment, while ensuring access to shelter, food, and medical care.

While IHL does not directly confer refugee status, its rules significantly influence the creation or prevention of refugee flows. In many cases, large-scale displacement is a direct consequence of violations of IHL, such as targeting civilians or unlawful destruction of civilian infrastructure. Thus, refugee protection is closely linked to the effective implementation of IHL, making compliance with its norms essential for reducing forced migration in armed conflict situations.

Intersection of Refugee Law and Humanitarian Law

The relationship between international refugee law and international humanitarian law (IHL) is best described as complementary yet structurally fragmented. Refugee law primarily becomes operational once individuals cross an international border and seek international protection due to a well-founded fear of persecution. In contrast, IHL governs the conduct of parties during armed conflict, regulating how wars are fought and setting limits on violence to protect those who are not participating in hostilities. Despite their distinct scopes, both legal regimes converge in addressing the consequences of armed conflict on civilian populations.

In contemporary displacement scenarios, significant areas of overlap have emerged. One prominent example is mass cross-border displacement caused by armed conflicts, as seen in crises such as Syria and Ukraine. In these situations, violations of IHL—including indiscriminate attacks, siege warfare, and targeting of civilian infrastructure—directly trigger large-scale refugee flows, thereby activating the protections under refugee law. Another increasingly important dimension is the phenomenon of mixed migration flows, where refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and economic migrants move together along the same routes. This complicates legal classification and challenges traditional protection mechanisms, which often rely on rigid categorizations.

Additionally, modern conflicts have witnessed the use of displacement as a method of warfare, including forced evacuation, ethnic cleansing, and population transfers. Such conduct is explicitly prohibited under IHL and may constitute a war crime or crime against humanity under the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. This underscores the direct criminalization of forced displacement under international law.

Given these realities, the integration of refugee law and IHL is essential for ensuring comprehensive and coherent protection. A coordinated legal approach enhances accountability, improves protection mechanisms, and ensures that individuals affected by conflict receive continuous protection across all stages of displacement.

Contemporary Conflicts and Refugee Crises

Contemporary armed conflicts have generated some of the most complex and large-scale displacement crises in modern history, revealing both the resilience and the limitations of international refugee and humanitarian law.

The Syrian civil war stands as one of the most severe displacement crises since the Second World War. Millions of Syrians have been forced to flee their homes, seeking refuge primarily in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as in Europe. The crisis has exposed significant weaknesses in global burden-sharing mechanisms and highlighted the fragmented nature of

international political responses. While host states have borne disproportionate responsibility, coordinated international resettlement efforts have remained limited. In the case of the Ukraine conflict, the displacement has been equally massive but has triggered a comparatively swift and coordinated legal response. European states activated temporary protection mechanisms, granting displaced Ukrainians immediate access to residence, work, and social services. However, this differential response has raised concerns regarding unequal humanitarian treatment, suggesting a potential hierarchy in the global application of refugee protection norms based on geography and political considerations.

The Afghanistan crisis, particularly following the Taliban's return to power in 2021, has led to renewed waves of displacement, especially affecting women, journalists, and former government officials. Despite the clear risks of persecution, Afghan asylum seekers often face inconsistent recognition of refugee status, reflecting both administrative challenges and geopolitical hesitation in host countries.

Similarly, the situation in Gaza and other prolonged occupation contexts demonstrates recurring cycles of forced displacement due to sustained violence, blockade conditions, and military operations. The legal characterization of such displacement raises complex issues under International Humanitarian Law, particularly concerning collective punishment, proportionality, and the prohibition of forced population transfer.

Together, these crises underscore the urgent need for a more consistent, equitable, and legally coherent international response to forced displacement.

Institutional Role of UNHCR

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees occupies a central and indispensable position in the architecture of global refugee governance. Established in 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly, its mandate is to lead and coordinate international action for the protection of refugees and the resolution of refugee problems worldwide. Over the decades, UNHCR has evolved from a temporary agency into a key humanitarian institution responding to large-scale and protracted displacement crises across multiple regions.

One of its primary functions is the provision of international protection. This includes ensuring respect for the principle of non-refoulement, assisting in refugee status determination processes, and advocating for the legal rights and safety of displaced persons. UNHCR also plays a crucial role in coordinating humanitarian assistance, working alongside governments, non-governmental organizations, and other UN agencies to deliver essential services such as shelter, food, healthcare, and education in emergency and long-term displacement settings.

In addition, the organization actively promotes durable solutions to refugee situations. These include voluntary repatriation to the country of origin when conditions permit, local integration into host communities, and third-country

resettlement for the most vulnerable refugees. These solutions aim to restore dignity, stability, and long-term security for displaced populations.

However, despite its broad and evolving mandate, UNHCR operates under significant structural and operational constraints. The agency is heavily dependent on voluntary contributions from donor states, leading to persistent funding shortages that limit the scope and effectiveness of its programs. Furthermore, its success is closely tied to state cooperation, as it lacks coercive authority and must rely on the political will of sovereign governments to implement protection measures and facilitate durable solutions.

Consequently, while UNHCR remains the cornerstone of international refugee protection, its effectiveness is continually shaped and sometimes constrained by the realities of international politics and resource limitations.

Challenges in Refugee Protection

Contemporary refugee protection faces multiple structural and normative challenges that undermine the effectiveness of the international legal regime. One of the most pressing concerns is the erosion of the principle of non-refoulement, which is widely regarded as the cornerstone of refugee law. In recent years, several states have adopted restrictive asylum policies, including externalization of border controls, offshore processing, and pushback operations at sea or land borders. Such practices risk violating the prohibition against returning individuals to territories where they face persecution, torture, or serious harm, thereby weakening a fundamental norm of international law.

A second major challenge is burden-sharing inequality. Although refugee flows are global in nature, the responsibility for hosting displaced populations is disproportionately borne by developing countries, which often have fewer economic and institutional resources. In contrast, wealthier states frequently contribute less in terms of refugee resettlement and long-term integration, leading to structural inequities in the international protection regime. This imbalance places unsustainable pressure on frontline host states and undermines global solidarity.

The politicization of refugee law further complicates protection efforts. Refugee admissions and asylum decisions are increasingly influenced by domestic political considerations, security narratives, and public opinion, rather than purely humanitarian or legal criteria. This politicization weakens consistent compliance with international obligations and contributes to selective enforcement of refugee norms.

Finally, climate and hybrid displacement represents an emerging legal frontier. While the 1951 Refugee Convention does not explicitly recognize environmental or climate-induced displacement, increasing environmental degradation, sea-level rise, and climate-related disasters are forcing populations to move across borders. This

creates a significant normative gap in international law, as existing frameworks are not fully equipped to address such forms of forced migration.

Collectively, these challenges highlight the urgent need for reform and greater international cooperation to ensure the continued relevance and effectiveness of refugee protection in the contemporary world.

Towards an Integrated Legal Approach

A more effective and sustainable refugee protection system in the contemporary era requires a coherent and integrated restructuring of existing international legal frameworks. First, there is a pressing need for the harmonization of refugee law, international humanitarian law, and international human rights law. Although these regimes operate in distinct legal domains, their practical application overlaps significantly in situations of armed conflict and mass displacement. A unified interpretative approach would ensure continuity of protection from the point of displacement through asylum and eventual durable solutions.

Second, the expansion of legal categories of protection is essential to address emerging forms of forced migration. The traditional definition under the 1951 Refugee Convention does not adequately cover individuals displaced by environmental degradation, climate change, or generalized violence in non-international armed conflicts. Recognizing climate-induced and conflict-induced displacement within international legal frameworks would fill a critical protection gap and reflect contemporary realities of mobility.

Third, strengthening international responsibility-sharing mechanisms is vital to address persistent inequities in refugee hosting. This includes equitable resettlement quotas, predictable funding arrangements, and enhanced cooperation among states to reduce the disproportionate burden on developing countries.

Fourth, regional protection frameworks should be further developed and supported, as they have demonstrated greater flexibility and responsiveness to local displacement dynamics. Regional instruments can complement global norms by providing context-specific solutions.

Finally, ensuring accountability for forced displacement as a war crime under international criminal law is crucial. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms under the Rome Statute can deter the deliberate use of displacement as a method of warfare.

Together, these reforms would create a more adaptive, equitable, and legally coherent refugee protection system capable of responding effectively to evolving global conflict realities.

Conclusion

Refugee protection in contemporary conflicts represents a complex interplay between the robustness of international legal norms and the persistent weaknesses in their practical enforcement. On the one hand, the normative architecture of refugee

law, international humanitarian law (IHL), and international human rights law is well-established, offering a comprehensive set of protections designed to safeguard individuals fleeing persecution, armed conflict, and serious human rights violations. Core principles such as non-refoulement, civilian protection, and the right to seek asylum form the ethical and legal foundation of this system. On the other hand, the implementation of these norms remains inconsistent, often shaped by political considerations, security concerns, and varying levels of state commitment.

The increasing complexity of modern armed conflicts—characterized by protracted civil wars, asymmetric warfare, mass displacement, and mixed migration flows—has exposed the limitations of a fragmented legal approach. In many situations, refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants move within the same migratory corridors, challenging traditional legal classifications and protection mechanisms. This reality underscores the urgent need for a more integrated and adaptive legal response that effectively bridges refugee law and IHL, ensuring continuity of protection throughout all phases of displacement.

Strengthening institutional cooperation, particularly among states, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and regional organizations, is essential to improving coordination and response capacity. Equally important is the establishment of equitable burden-sharing mechanisms that distribute responsibilities more fairly among states, thereby reducing pressure on frontline host countries.

At the same time, reaffirming fundamental principles such as non-refoulement remains critical to preserving the integrity of the international protection regime. Ultimately, refugee protection transcends its legal dimension; it is also a moral imperative rooted in the principles of human dignity, solidarity, and justice that underpin the international legal order.

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International Humanitarian Law and Armed Conflicts in the Middle East: Assessing Civilian Protection in Contemporary Warfare

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Abstract

The Middle East has been one of the most conflict-prone regions in the contemporary world, experiencing prolonged armed conflicts, foreign interventions, civil wars, and insurgencies. These conflicts have resulted in significant civilian casualties, displacement, destruction of infrastructure, and humanitarian crises. International Humanitarian Law (IHL), commonly referred to as the law of armed conflict, seeks to limit the effects of warfare by protecting civilians and regulating the conduct of hostilities. Despite the existence of comprehensive legal frameworks such as the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols, contemporary conflicts in the Middle East continue to expose civilians to severe risks. This article critically examines the application of International Humanitarian Law in contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts, focusing on the principles of distinction, proportionality, necessity, and precaution. Through an analysis of conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Gaza, the study evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal mechanisms for civilian protection. It argues that while IHL provides a robust normative framework, enforcement challenges, asymmetrical warfare, urban combat, and geopolitical interests frequently undermine civilian protection. The article concludes that strengthening accountability mechanisms and enhancing compliance with humanitarian norms remain essential for safeguarding civilians in modern warfare.

Introduction

Armed conflicts in the Middle East have shaped global political and security dynamics for decades. The region has witnessed interstate wars, civil conflicts, foreign military interventions, proxy wars, and insurgencies involving both state and non-state actors. Conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and the Israeli-Palestinian territories have generated unprecedented humanitarian consequences, including civilian deaths, displacement, food insecurity, and destruction of essential infrastructure.

The increasing complexity of modern warfare has raised important questions regarding the effectiveness of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) in protecting civilians. IHL seeks to balance military necessity with humanitarian considerations by regulating the conduct of parties involved in armed conflicts. The legal framework imposes obligations on combatants while providing protections for civilians and other non-combatants.

Despite these protections, civilian populations continue to bear the greatest burden of contemporary conflicts. Urban warfare, indiscriminate attacks, use of explosive weapons in populated areas, and attacks on healthcare facilities have intensified humanitarian suffering across the region.

This article examines the role of International Humanitarian Law in contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts and assesses the extent to which legal protections for civilians have been implemented and enforced.

International Humanitarian Law: Concept and Foundations

International Humanitarian Law is a branch of international law that regulates the conduct of armed conflicts. Its primary objective is to limit human suffering during warfare by protecting persons who are not participating in hostilities and by restricting the means and methods of warfare.

The modern framework of IHL is primarily based on:

- The four Geneva Conventions of 1949.
- The Additional Protocols of 1977.
- Customary international humanitarian law.

Various international treaties regulating specific weapons and military practices.

The Geneva Conventions provide protections for wounded soldiers, prisoners of war, shipwrecked military personnel, and civilians. These conventions are universally ratified and form the cornerstone of humanitarian law.

IHL applies during both international armed conflicts and non-international armed conflicts. Given that many Middle Eastern conflicts involve a combination of domestic and international actors, the applicability of IHL remains particularly significant.

Core Principles of Civilian Protection

- **Principle of Distinction**

The principle of distinction requires parties to a conflict to distinguish at all times between combatants and civilians. Attacks may only be directed against military objectives and combatants.

Civilians must not be targeted directly unless they take a direct part in hostilities. This principle represents one of the most fundamental protections under humanitarian law.

- **Principle of Proportionality**

The principle of proportionality prohibits attacks expected to cause incidental civilian harm that would be excessive in relation to the anticipated military advantage.

Military commanders must assess whether civilian casualties are proportionate to the military objectives being pursued.

- **Principle of Military Necessity**

Military necessity permits only those actions necessary to achieve legitimate military objectives. The principle does not justify violations of humanitarian law or attacks on civilians.

- **Principle of Precaution**

Parties to a conflict must take all feasible precautions to minimize civilian harm. This includes selecting appropriate weapons, verifying military targets, and providing warnings when possible.

Together, these principles form the legal foundation for civilian protection during armed conflict.

Contemporary Armed Conflicts in the Middle East

- **Syrian Civil War**

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, represents one of the most devastating humanitarian crises of the modern era. The conflict has involved government forces, opposition groups, extremist organizations, and foreign military actors.

Numerous reports have documented attacks on hospitals, schools, residential areas, and humanitarian personnel. The extensive use of explosive weapons in urban areas has resulted in significant civilian casualties.

The complexity of the conflict, involving multiple state and non-state actors, has created substantial challenges for the enforcement of humanitarian law.

- **Yemen Conflict**

The conflict in Yemen has generated one of the world's most severe humanitarian emergencies. Military operations conducted by various parties have been associated

with civilian casualties, destruction of infrastructure, and disruption of humanitarian assistance.

Airstrikes, blockades, and attacks affecting civilian facilities have raised significant concerns regarding compliance with IHL principles.

The conflict illustrates how prolonged warfare can undermine access to food, healthcare, water, and sanitation, thereby exacerbating civilian suffering.

- **Iraq and Counterterrorism Operations**

Military operations against extremist groups such as ISIS involved intense urban warfare in cities including Mosul.

While military campaigns sought to eliminate terrorist threats, urban combat resulted in extensive destruction and civilian displacement. The presence of civilians in conflict zones complicated efforts to comply fully with distinction and proportionality requirements.

- **Gaza and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to generate legal and humanitarian debates concerning civilian protection. Repeated cycles of violence have affected densely populated civilian areas.

Questions regarding proportionality, targeting decisions, siege conditions, and humanitarian access remain central to discussions of IHL compliance in the region. The conflict demonstrates the difficulties of applying humanitarian law in highly urbanized and politically contested environments.

Challenges to Civilian Protection in Contemporary Warfare

- **Urbanization of Conflict**

Modern conflicts increasingly occur in densely populated urban areas. Cities contain complex networks of civilian infrastructure including hospitals, schools, residential buildings, and transportation systems.

Military operations in urban environments increase the likelihood of civilian casualties and infrastructure damage.

- **Non-State Armed Groups**

Many contemporary conflicts involve non-state actors who may not possess the organizational structures necessary to ensure compliance with humanitarian law.

The presence of armed groups operating within civilian populations further complicates distinction between combatants and non-combatants.

- **Asymmetrical Warfare**

Asymmetrical warfare occurs when parties possess significantly different military capabilities.

Weaker actors may rely on guerrilla tactics, while stronger actors may employ advanced technologies such as drones and precision-guided munitions. These dynamics create complex legal and operational challenges.

- **Technological Developments**

The increasing use of drones, cyber operations, artificial intelligence, and autonomous systems raises new questions regarding accountability and civilian protection.

Although advanced technologies may improve targeting accuracy, concerns remain regarding transparency and legal responsibility.

- **Humanitarian Consequences for Civilians**

The impact of Middle Eastern conflicts extends beyond immediate physical harm. Civilian populations experience a wide range of humanitarian consequences.

- **Displacement**

Millions of people have been internally displaced or forced to seek refuge across borders. Displacement often disrupts livelihoods, education, healthcare, and social networks.

- **Healthcare Challenges**

Attacks on healthcare facilities and medical personnel undermine access to essential services. Public health systems frequently collapse during prolonged conflicts.

- **Food Insecurity**

Conflict-related disruptions to agricultural production, transportation networks, and humanitarian access contribute to food shortages and malnutrition.

- **Psychological Trauma**

Exposure to violence, displacement, and loss creates long-term psychological effects, particularly among children and vulnerable populations.

These consequences demonstrate the importance of effective civilian protection mechanisms under IHL.

- **Accountability and Enforcement Mechanisms**

One of the greatest challenges facing International Humanitarian Law is ensuring accountability for violations.

- **International Criminal Court (ICC)**

The International Criminal Court possesses jurisdiction over war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide under certain conditions.

The ICC plays an important role in promoting accountability, although jurisdictional and political limitations often constrain its effectiveness.

- **United Nations Mechanisms**

The United Nations Security Council, Human Rights Council, and various investigative bodies monitor alleged violations of international law.

Fact-finding missions and commissions of inquiry contribute to documentation and accountability efforts.

- **Domestic Prosecutions**

States bear primary responsibility for investigating and prosecuting violations of humanitarian law. However, political instability and institutional weaknesses often hinder domestic accountability mechanisms.

- **Universal Jurisdiction**

Certain serious violations may be prosecuted under universal jurisdiction principles, allowing states to pursue accountability regardless of where crimes occurred.

Despite these mechanisms, enforcement remains inconsistent and frequently influenced by geopolitical considerations.

- **Strengthening Civilian Protection**

Several measures can improve civilian protection in contemporary conflicts.

First, military forces should enhance training regarding humanitarian law and civilian protection obligations.

Second, greater investment in precision targeting and civilian harm mitigation strategies is necessary.

Third, humanitarian access must be protected and facilitated during conflicts.

Fourth, international accountability mechanisms should be strengthened to deter violations.

Fifth, diplomatic efforts should prioritize conflict prevention and peaceful resolution.

Finally, states and non-state actors must recognize that compliance with humanitarian law is not merely a legal obligation but a moral imperative.

Conclusion

International Humanitarian Law remains the primary legal framework governing civilian protection during armed conflicts. The Geneva Conventions and related legal instruments establish clear obligations designed to reduce human suffering and regulate the conduct of hostilities.

Contemporary conflicts in the Middle East demonstrate both the importance and limitations of humanitarian law. While legal norms provide comprehensive protections, implementation and enforcement remain significant challenges. Urban warfare, asymmetrical conflicts, non-state armed groups, and geopolitical rivalries frequently undermine compliance.

The humanitarian consequences of these conflicts—including civilian casualties, displacement, food insecurity, and destruction of infrastructure—underscore the urgent need for stronger protection mechanisms.

Ultimately, effective civilian protection depends not only on legal frameworks but also on political will, accountability, and commitment to humanitarian principles. Strengthening compliance with International Humanitarian Law remains essential for reducing civilian suffering and promoting peace and security in the Middle East.

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State Sovereignty, Foreign Military Intervention and International Law in the Middle East: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Conflicts

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Abstract

The Middle East has remained one of the most strategically significant and conflict-ridden regions in international politics. Contemporary conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Palestine have attracted extensive foreign military involvement, raising fundamental questions regarding state sovereignty, the legality of intervention, and the application of international law. The principle of sovereignty, a cornerstone of the modern international system, protects states from external interference while preserving territorial integrity and political independence. However, humanitarian crises, terrorism, civil wars, and regional instability have prompted states and international organizations to justify military interventions on various legal grounds, including self-defense, collective security, humanitarian intervention, and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). This article critically examines the relationship between state sovereignty, foreign military intervention, and international law in contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts. Through an analysis of legal doctrines, United Nations Charter provisions, and recent conflicts, the study evaluates competing interpretations of international law and their implications for global governance. The article argues that while international law provides a framework for regulating the use of force, geopolitical interests and selective enforcement often undermine its effectiveness. The study concludes that strengthening multilateral mechanisms and reaffirming respect for international legal norms are essential for maintaining international peace and security.

Introduction

The modern international order is built upon the principle of state sovereignty. Since the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, sovereignty has served as the foundation of relations among states, guaranteeing territorial integrity, political independence, and non-interference in domestic affairs. The United Nations Charter further institutionalized these principles following the Second World War.

The Middle East provides a particularly important context for examining the tensions between sovereignty and intervention. The region has experienced prolonged conflicts involving civil wars, foreign occupations, counterterrorism operations, proxy wars, and humanitarian crises. These conflicts have frequently attracted intervention by regional and global powers, raising questions about the legality and legitimacy of military action.

Contemporary interventions are often justified using legal arguments related to self-defense, humanitarian protection, counterterrorism, or collective security. However, critics argue that many interventions reflect geopolitical interests rather than genuine adherence to international law.

This article explores how international law addresses the relationship between sovereignty and intervention and evaluates the legal controversies surrounding contemporary conflicts in the Middle East.

The Concept of State Sovereignty

State sovereignty is one of the fundamental principles of international law. Sovereignty refers to the supreme authority of a state over its territory and population, free from external interference.

The principle has two dimensions

Internal Sovereignty

Internal sovereignty concerns a state's authority to govern its domestic affairs without external intervention. Governments possess the exclusive right to enact laws, maintain public order, and regulate internal political processes.

External Sovereignty

External sovereignty refers to the recognition of a state's independence by other states and international institutions. It protects territorial integrity and political independence from foreign interference.

The United Nations Charter reflects these principles. Article 2(1) affirms the sovereign equality of all member states, while Article 2(7) prohibits intervention in matters essentially within domestic jurisdiction.

Sovereignty remains a cornerstone of international stability. However, contemporary conflicts have challenged traditional understandings of non-intervention.

International Law and the Prohibition on the Use of Force

The prohibition of force represents one of the most important principles of modern international law.

Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter

Article 2(4) prohibits states from using force against the territorial integrity or political independence of another state.

This provision seeks to prevent aggression and maintain international peace and security.

Exceptions to the Prohibition

International law recognizes only limited exceptions to the prohibition on the use of force:

Self-Defense

Article 51 of the UN Charter recognizes the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense in response to an armed attack.

Security Council Authorization

The United Nations Security Council may authorize the use of force under Chapter VII when necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security.

These exceptions form the primary legal basis for foreign military intervention.

Humanitarian Intervention and the Responsibility to Protect

One of the most controversial developments in international law concerns humanitarian intervention.

Humanitarian intervention refers to the use of force by one or more states to prevent large-scale human rights violations in another state without the consent of the affected government.

Supporters argue that intervention may be justified to prevent genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

Critics contend that humanitarian intervention undermines sovereignty and may be abused for political purposes.

Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

The Responsibility to Protect doctrine emerged in the early twenty-first century as an attempt to reconcile sovereignty and human rights protection.

R2P is based on three pillars:

- States bear responsibility for protecting their populations.
- The international community should assist states in fulfilling this responsibility.
- Collective action may be undertaken when states manifestly fail to protect their populations.

Although widely discussed, the practical implementation of R2P remains contested.

Foreign Military Intervention in Iraq

The 2003 invasion of Iraq represents one of the most controversial military interventions in modern history.

The United States and coalition partners justified the intervention primarily on grounds relating to weapons of mass destruction and international security concerns. However, the absence of explicit Security Council authorization generated significant legal controversy.

Many scholars and governments argued that the intervention violated Article 2(4) of the UN Charter because it lacked a valid legal basis under international law.

The Iraq case remains a prominent example of tensions between strategic objectives and legal constraints.

The long-term consequences included political instability, insurgency, humanitarian crises, and regional insecurity.

The Syrian Conflict and Legal Complexity

The Syrian civil war illustrates the complexity of modern intervention debates.

Multiple actors—including the Syrian government, opposition groups, terrorist organizations, regional powers, and global powers—have participated in the conflict.

Russian Intervention

Russia justified its military intervention in Syria based on the invitation of the Syrian government. Under international law, military assistance provided with the consent of a recognized government is generally considered lawful.

United States-Led Operations

The United States and coalition partners conducted military operations against ISIS in Syria. These actions were frequently justified under collective self-defense doctrines and counterterrorism objectives.

However, questions remain regarding the scope and duration of such interventions.

The Syrian conflict demonstrates how multiple legal justifications may coexist within a single conflict environment.

The Yemen Conflict and Proxy Warfare

The conflict in Yemen provides another important example of foreign intervention.

A Saudi-led coalition intervened in support of the internationally recognized Yemeni government against Houthi forces.

The intervention was justified primarily on the basis of governmental consent and collective self-defense.

At the same time, allegations of violations of international humanitarian law have generated extensive debate regarding civilian protection and accountability.

The Yemen conflict highlights the intersection between sovereignty, regional security concerns, and humanitarian obligations.

Libya and the Responsibility to Protect

The 2011 intervention in Libya remains one of the most significant applications of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine.

Following escalating violence against civilians, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1973, authorizing member states to take all necessary measures to protect civilians.

The intervention was widely viewed as legally justified because it received explicit Security Council authorization.

However, subsequent regime changes and instability generated controversy regarding the scope and implementation of the mandate.

Many states became increasingly skeptical of humanitarian intervention after Libya, fearing misuse of Security Council authorizations.

Foreign Intervention and Counterterrorism

The rise of transnational terrorist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda has complicated traditional understandings of sovereignty.

States increasingly argue that self-defense may justify military action against non-state actors operating from another state's territory when that state is unwilling or unable to address the threat.

The "unwilling or unable" doctrine has become particularly influential in contemporary security discourse.

However, its legal status remains contested.

Critics argue that expansive interpretations of self-defense risk eroding sovereignty protections and creating opportunities for unilateral military action.

Supporters contend that evolving security threats require adaptation of legal doctrines.

Challenges to International Law

Several factors complicate the application of international law in contemporary Middle Eastern conflicts.

Selective Enforcement

Powerful states often enjoy greater freedom in interpreting and applying international legal norms.

Perceived double standards undermine the legitimacy of international institutions and legal frameworks.

Security Council Deadlock

Political divisions among permanent members frequently prevent collective action in response to conflicts.

Veto power can limit the effectiveness of the Security Council in maintaining peace and security.

Proxy Conflicts

Regional and global powers increasingly engage in indirect conflicts through local actors.

Proxy warfare complicates accountability and legal responsibility.

Non-State Actors

Many contemporary conflicts involve armed groups that are not traditional state actors.

This creates challenges for legal regulation and enforcement.

Balancing Sovereignty and Human Rights

One of the central dilemmas of contemporary international law concerns balancing sovereignty with human rights protection.

Excessive emphasis on sovereignty may allow governments to commit abuses without external accountability.

Conversely, excessive interventionism risks undermining international stability and enabling geopolitical manipulation.

A balanced approach requires:

- Respect for territorial integrity.
- Strong multilateral decision-making.
- Effective humanitarian protection.
- Consistent application of legal standards.
- Accountability for violations of international law.

The legitimacy of intervention depends not only on legal justification but also on adherence to principles of necessity, proportionality, and collective authorization.

The Future of International Law in the Middle East

The future effectiveness of international law in the Middle East depends upon strengthening multilateral institutions and improving compliance mechanisms.

The United Nations remains central to maintaining international peace and security. However, institutional reforms may be necessary to address contemporary challenges.

Greater emphasis on preventive diplomacy, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding can reduce reliance on military intervention.

International accountability mechanisms, including international criminal tribunals and investigative bodies, should also be strengthened to deter violations.

Ultimately, preserving the credibility of international law requires consistent application of legal norms regardless of political or strategic considerations.

Conclusion

The relationship between state sovereignty, foreign military intervention, and international law remains one of the most contested issues in contemporary

international relations. Middle Eastern conflicts provide important case studies for examining these tensions.

The United Nations Charter establishes sovereignty and non-intervention as foundational principles while recognizing limited exceptions relating to self-defense and collective security. Humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect have further complicated traditional understandings of sovereignty.

Conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya demonstrate the legal and political complexities associated with foreign military intervention. While international law provides a framework for regulating the use of force, enforcement often remains inconsistent due to geopolitical interests and institutional limitations.

The challenge for the international community is to balance respect for sovereignty with the need to address humanitarian crises, terrorism, and threats to international peace. Strengthening multilateral institutions, enhancing accountability, and promoting consistent adherence to legal principles are essential for ensuring that international law remains a meaningful instrument for maintaining global order.

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Future Security Challenges in the Middle East and Asia

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Abstract

The geopolitical landscapes of the Middle East and Asia are undergoing profound transformation, driven by shifting power dynamics, technological proliferation, and resource scarcity. This article examines four interrelated future security challenges. First, the rise of multipolar competition involving China, India, the United States, and regional hegemons will reshape alliance structures and increase the risk of miscalculation. Second, the weaponization of cyber and space domains introduces new theatres of conflict where traditional deterrence models are difficult to apply. Third, climate induced instability and water conflicts are acting as threat multipliers, exacerbating existing grievances and displacing populations. Fourth, the evolution of non-state actors into technologically capable insurgent networks enables them to challenge conventional military forces. Drawing on current geopolitical trends and defense analyses, the article argues that future security threats will be hybrid in nature, transcending traditional state to state warfare. Effective mitigation requires adaptive multilateral frameworks, significant investment in cyber resilience, and the integration of climate sensitivity into all security planning. The consequences of inaction include chronic regional instability, escalated arms races, and the potential for catastrophic miscalculation between major powers.

Keywords: Middle East security, Asian security, hybrid warfare, non-state actors, water scarcity

Introduction

The early 21st century has witnessed a diffusion of global power away from a United States led unipolar order toward a more complex, multipolar system. Nowhere is this transition more consequential than in the Middle East and Asia. As a matter of fact, these two regions combined comprise more than 60% of the global

population, the vast majority of proven energy resources, and numerous other strategic hotspots (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS], 2023). In the future, security problems in these two parts of the globe would not merely represent the extension of existing tensions; rather, they would stem from the intersection of various other factors.

Traditionally, security studies have tended to analyze the Middle East and Asia in isolation from each other, as two different strategic theaters characterized by unique dynamics. The Middle East was studied in the context of Arab-Israeli conflict, energy security, and sectarian conflict. Asia was studied in the context of great power rivalry, territorial disputes, and nuclear proliferation in the Korean peninsula. But this kind of fragmented approach is becoming less viable. This is because of the growing role of China as a major international player whose interests extend to the Middle East, the engagement of Asian states like India and Pakistan in Middle Eastern security issues due to their diasporas and oil needs, as well as the international nature of supply chain issues and cybersecurity.

The present article examines to this gap by examining future security challenges in both regions simultaneously. It identifies four major challenge clusters that will shape the strategic environment for the coming decade and beyond. These are multipolar rivalry and arms dynamism, the weaponization of cyber and space domains, climate induced instability and water conflicts, and the evolution of non-state actors into technology enabled networks. The introduction establishes the rationale for this integrated approach and previews the structure of the article.

Objectives

This article pursues five specific objectives. Those are:

- to analyze shifting power dynamics in the Middle East and Asia, including the roles of China, India, the United States, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Israel, and to identify flashpoints such as the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, the India China border, and the Persian Gulf.
- to assess technological proliferation in cyber and space domains, evaluating current capabilities, gaps in international law, and the attribution problem in cyberspace.
- to examine climate change and security, focusing on water scarcity, sea level rise, and the preparedness of regional militaries for climate induced instability.
- to investigate the transformation of non-state actors, including how drones, encrypted communications, and 3D printing have empowered militant groups and blurred the line between state directed and autonomous violence.
- to derive policy recommendations on cyber deterrence, space norms, water diplomacy, climate adaptation, and countering hybrid non-state actors.

Data and Methodology

The methodology used in this article is an interpretive, qualitative approach based on document analysis and synthesis of secondary data. Data collection includes five types. These include peer-reviewed journal articles such as the *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *Middle East Policy*, and *Security Dialogue*. Other types of data collected include official government and military publications like the *IISS Military Balance 2023* and U.S. Department of Defense (2022) report on China. Third is intergovernmental reports like the IPCC (2022) climate assessment report and World Bank (2021) climate risk information. The fourth type of data collected are think tank publications from Secure World Foundation (Weeden & Samson, 2019) and Brookings Institution (Byman, 2022).

The analysis conducted was qualitative thematic analysis. Multipolar competition, disruptive technologies, climate threat multiplication, and non-state violence are among the recurring themes identified across the literature. Thematic analysis was used to group these themes under four clusters of challenges. The analysis was comparative, identifying similarities and differences between the Middle East and Asia while acknowledging their different strategic logic.

Result and Discussion

Four main conclusions emerge from the analysis of the data sources, with each of these linked to the four challenge clusters mentioned in the objective. They are set out below in sequence, including discussion in each section.

The first and most significant result is that the transition from unipolarity to multipolarity is accelerating in both the Middle East and Asia, but with different configurations in each region. In Asia, the dominant dynamic is the systemic competition between the United States and China. Evidence from the U.S. Department of Defense (2022) indicates that China has expanded its military installations in the South China Sea, developed hypersonic missiles capable of penetrating existing missile defense systems, and deployed artificial intelligence enabled command and control networks. China's military budget has grown consistently for more than two decades, and its naval fleet now exceeds the United States Navy in total number of vessels, although not in overall tonnage or capability.

The US reaction to that has been the fortification of its pre-existing alliance structure through initiatives such as AUKUS, which is an advanced version of the trilateral security arrangement involving the US, Australia, and the UK, and the Quad arrangement between Japan, India, and Australia. However, unlike NATO-style defense alliances, these alliances are not formal mutual defense agreements. The degree of commitment differs, and there remains a risk of the breakup of these alliances when they face external pressures. If tensions were ever to break out over Taiwan, for instance, it is not clear that the US allies would engage militarily.

The position of India is quite complicated. First, India is involved in territorial disputes with China and also had armed conflict with China in 2020, where soldiers from both sides were killed. Second, India works together with the USA in the Quad group and holds joint military exercises with the United States. Nonetheless, India has managed to maintain its autonomy in its strategic position. India keeps buying Russian weapons and even agreed to use the S 400 surface to air missile system, despite being under pressure from the United States because of sanctions.

Multipolarity in the Middle East is unique. While the U.S. still serves as the predominant external military actor in the region, it has changed from intervening to providing “over the horizon support” and conducting strikes. Vacuums created by the new approach have been filled by regional powers. For instance, Iran has reached the point where it can enrich uranium to weapons grade, and also has extensive capabilities in ballistic missiles and UAVs. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have built up extensive defensive and offensive capabilities in terms of air defense systems, precise weaponry, and training programs for their troops. Finally, Turkey has been able to project military power into Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the Caucasus through drones and proxy forces that it operates.

The Abraham Accords, which established ties between Israel and a number of Arab countries, have brought about a new coalition against Iran. Nevertheless, such a coalition does not represent a military alliance but rather a group of sovereign countries with their own strategic considerations, as well as the ongoing problem of Palestine that is putting pressure on the internal politics of Arab countries signed up to the deal. Meanwhile, Iran has further consolidated its proxy armies across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. As a consequence, Iran gains the capacity to retaliate against opponents without fighting in a conventional manner.

The second major result is that the weaponization of cyberspace and outer space is proceeding more rapidly than the development of international norms or defensive capabilities. In the cyber domain, the key finding is that state sponsored attacks have already caused significant physical and economic damage. The 2019 attacks on Saudi Arabian energy infrastructure, attributed to Iranian actors, temporarily disrupted global oil markets. The 2010 Stuxnet attack on Iranian nuclear centrifuges, attributed to United States and Israeli cooperation, physically destroyed equipment. The 2020 cyber intrusion into South Korean financial networks, attributed to North Korean actors, caused millions of dollars in losses (Kello, 2017). Future cyber-attacks will probably be much more harmful and harder to trace. Due to such factors as widespread ransomware-as-a-service models, the adoption of AI to automate attacks and the emergence of encrypted channels of communication, launching a cyber-attack has been made much easier. The issue of attribution still poses a problem. Cyber criminals may direct their activities through servers located in several jurisdictions, employ the technique of false flag operation in order to

make another country seem like a culprit, or launch attacks from locations which cannot cooperate legally. While the problem of attributing responsibility for an attack may be solved with technological means, political consensus on a course of action is not always easy to achieve.

In the space domain, the key finding is that anti-satellite weapons are now operational in multiple countries. China's 2007 test of a direct ascent kinetic anti-satellite weapon created a cloud of orbital debris that remains in orbit today, threatening other spacecraft. India's 2019 test of a similar weapon demonstrated that anti-satellite capability is no longer limited to the traditional great powers. Russia has also demonstrated anti-satellite capabilities and has conducted on orbit maneuvers suggesting inspection and potential interception of other nations' satellites (Weeden & Samson, 2019).

Space war would bring about catastrophic results. Satellites are used to facilitate the internet, banks, and emergency assistance throughout the world. Precision guided weapons, military logistics, and transportation all depend on navigation satellites. Missile strikes can be detected via surveillance satellites as well as treaty compliance verified by the same means. An assault on space constellations using either interceptors, cyberspace hacking, or directed energy would cause nations to lose their eyesight in space and leave them vulnerable at home. Although the Outer Space Treaty of 1967 forbids placing any weapons of mass destruction in orbit, it makes no mention of anti-satellite weaponry, cyberspace attacks against ground control stations, or missile defense platforms.

The third major result is that climate change is already acting as a threat multiplier in both the Middle East and Asia, and this effect will intensify significantly by mid-century. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) concluded with high confidence that climate change exacerbates existing grievances, weakens fragile institutions, and creates conditions conducive to violent conflict. The World Bank (2021) projects that by 2050, climate driven water scarcity could reduce gross domestic product in parts of the Middle East by 6 to 14 percent annually.

The direct connection between climate change and conflict lies in water scarcity. Conflicts have already erupted in the Tigris Euphrates region, which includes Turkey, Syria, and Iraq due to dam construction by Turkey leading to decreased river flow. The Indus River, which goes through India and Pakistan, has an agreement in place called the Indus Waters Treaty in 1960, but it is increasingly challenged by the military tensions that have existed over the years. The Jordan Basin has become increasingly overstretched and further droughts in the future can increase the competition between Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the Palestinian territories.

Extreme temperatures constitute the second link between climate change and conflict. Areas within parts of the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, Pakistan, and India are already experiencing summer temperatures greater than 50 degrees Celsius. By

2050, assuming moderate levels of greenhouse gas emissions, some of these areas may become uninhabitable during parts of the year unless the population lives in artificially cooled buildings. This leads to massive migrations within and out of the regions. Migration may spark ethnic conflicts because the migratory masses will be forced to compete with other ethnic or sectarian groups for limited natural resources.

The third mechanism is sea level rise, which poses particular problems in Asia. If the rise in sea level were to reach 1m by 2100, which is very realistic, then tens of millions of people in the Ganges Brahmaputra Delta region of Bangladesh and India would be displaced. This would put coastal cities like Shanghai, Mumbai, Dhaka, Jakarta, Ho Chi Minh, and Bangkok at greater risk from storm surges, salination, and permanent inundation. The displacement of tens of millions of people from these regions could destabilize the situation and lead to conflict.

In spite of these forecasts, however, it emerges that most militaries and security organizations in the Middle East and Asia have been relatively slow to incorporate climate change into their national security policies. The problem is generally regarded as more of an environmental or humanitarian issue, and climate change continues to be seen as peripheral to national security issues rather than central to them. Very few militaries allocate any budget specifically to address climate change challenges, such as relocating bases along coastlines.

The fourth major outcome is that the abilities of non-state actors are now at the same level as those of military organizations in state armed forces, thus changing the whole character of asymmetric warfare. The attack by Houthis on Saudi Aramco facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais is a good illustration. The militants resorted to a combination of a swarm attack of both drones and cruise missiles to penetrate advanced defense systems and stop nearly half of Saudi Arabia's oil output (Khan, 2020). Thus, this incident clearly shows how a non-state actor with outside assistance can damage a state opponent strategically.

All that is possible because of the widespread availability of commercial technology. Drones with high-resolution cameras, GPS navigation, and the ability to mount some kind of weaponry are sold for a couple of thousands of dollars. Communication tools such as messaging services are well encrypted, so messages are hard to intercept by anyone else. With three-dimensional printers, one may produce guns, drones, and other kinds of explosives without going through any usual supply chain. These technologies are quite accessible and cannot be controlled by export bans or sanctions.

These technologies are being exploited by the separatist Baloch tribes in Pakistan and Iran, Islamic insurgents in southern Philippines, and rebel organizations in northeastern India. Small drones adapted to carry out attacks using hand-grenades and homemade explosives have been seen in many conflict regions. Social networking sites can be used not only for propaganda but also for recruiting

members, raising funds, and coordinating operations. Conventional counterterror techniques that work through cutting off lines of communication, supply lines, and leadership networks become less effective with technology.

The study also shows that the distinction between state-sponsored, state-tolerated, and autonomous non-state violence is becoming more blurred. The Iranian government provides financial support, training, and weapons to Hezbollah, the Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces, the Houthis, and many other organizations. The Pakistani government has, over time, utilized non-state entities that operate in Kashmir in order to put pressure on the Indian government without having to wage conventional warfare directly (Byman, 2022). There are many instances where Russia has utilized the services of private military organizations such as the Wagner Group, especially in Syria and Africa, as a means of gaining a strategic advantage without compromising plausible deniability.

Conclusions

This article examined four future security challenges in the Middle East and Asia: multipolar rivalry, cyber and space weaponization, climate instability, and technology enabled non-state actors. First, the shift from unipolarity to multipolarity reshapes alliances and raises miscalculation risks. The United States China rivalry dominates Asia, while India maintains strategic autonomy. In the Middle East, regional powers pursue independent postures amid United States retrenchment. The lack of Cold War style crisis communication channels increases escalation risks. Second, cyber and space technologies outpace international norms. Cyberattacks cause conventional level damage but attribution remains difficult. Multiple countries possess anti-satellite weapons, yet no binding norms govern space conflict. These gaps constitute growing risks. Third, climate change acts as a threat multiplier. Water scarcity, temperature extremes, and sea level rise will displace populations and increase conflict likelihood. Most security institutions treat climate as an environmental issue, not a core national security threat. Fourth, non-state actors now use commercial drones, encrypted communications, and 3D printing to challenge state militaries. The blurred line between state directed and autonomous violence complicates deterrence. Policy recommendations include investing in cyber deterrence and crisis hotlines, negotiating water sharing agreements for the Tigris Euphrates and Indus basins, integrating climate adaptation into security planning, and developing drone detection systems plus legal frameworks to restrict attack drone transfers to non-state actors. Without proactive adaptation, the future will feature chronic crises and sudden escalations. The window for preventive action is narrowing.

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Conflict Ridden Middle East Asia: Historical Roots and Contemporary Military Realities

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India's Strategic Role in the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges

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Abstract

The Middle East is a crucial region for India because of its strategic geographical position, abundant energy resources, expanding economic prospects, and the large Indian community living there. Traditionally, India's engagement with the region was driven mainly by energy security concerns. However, in recent years, this relationship has broadened into a comprehensive strategic partnership covering areas such as defence cooperation, trade and investment, maritime security, counter-terrorism, and technological innovation. At the same time, evolving geopolitical dynamics including the Abraham Accords, changing regional power balances, China's increasing presence, and ongoing conflicts have created new opportunities for India while also posing significant strategic challenges. This research paper examines India's strategic role in the Middle East by analyzing the available opportunities and the challenges that could impede its regional ambitions.

The study employs a qualitative research methodology based on secondary data derived from government reports, academic literature, strategic documents, and international organizations. The findings indicate that India's policy towards the Middle East is increasingly grounded in strategic realism, 'multi-alignment,' and economic diplomacy. However, key challenges persist, including maintaining balanced relations with rival regional powers, ensuring energy security,

safeguarding the interests of the Indian diaspora, and navigating geopolitical competition.

Introduction

The Middle East has emerged as a region of immense strategic importance within the framework of India's foreign policy. Situated at the crossroads of Africa, Asia, and Europe, this region serves as a vital link connecting international trade routes and energy supply chains. For India—a nation whose economic progress relies heavily on energy imports and international trade stability and cooperation in the Middle East are matters of national interest.

Historically, India's ties with the Middle East have been shaped by centuries of cultural exchange, maritime trade, and civilizational connections. Following independence in 1947, India's approach to the region was influenced by anti-colonial solidarity, the principles of the Non-Aligned Movement, and support for the Palestinian cause. During the Cold War, India's engagement with the region was cautious, focusing primarily on securing oil supplies and maintaining cordial relations with Arab nations.

Significant shifts occurred in India's Middle East policy in the post-Cold War era. Economic liberalization in the 1990s led to rising energy demands and an expansion of India's global ambitions. Diplomatic relations with Israel were normalized in 1992, opening up new avenues for cooperation in defence, agriculture, and technology. Concurrently, India strengthened its partnerships with Gulf nations such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman. In recent times, India's engagement with the Middle East has broadened significantly. The region serves as a major source of crude oil and natural gas imports, a workplace for millions of Indian workers, a key market for Indian exports, and a crucial partner in ensuring maritime security and combating terrorism. New initiatives such as the 'India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor' have further enhanced India's strategic significance.

However, India also faces numerous challenges due to its growing interests in the Middle East. Factors such as regional instability, geopolitical rivalry, China's expanding influence, and the need to balance relations with conflicting powers require meticulous diplomatic management. Against this backdrop, it has become essential to understand India's strategic role in the Middle East.

Research Objectives

The primary objectives of this study are as follows:

- To analyze the opportunities available to India for strengthening ties with the region.
- To identify the key challenges affecting India's strategic interests in the Middle East.

- To examine the strategic importance of the Middle East in India's foreign policy.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What opportunities does this region offer for advancing India's national interests?
- What are the major challenges India faces in strengthening its relations with the Middle East?
- Why is the Middle East region strategically important for India?

Research Methodology

Qualitative and descriptive methods have been adopted for this research. The study relies primarily on secondary sources of information, including government publications, reports from international organizations, scholarly articles, books, policy briefs, and research journals. Information has been gathered from sources such as the Ministry of External Affairs (Government of India), the International Energy Agency, the World Bank, the Observer Research Foundation, and academic publications focusing on Indian foreign policy and Middle Eastern geopolitics. The analytical approach involves examining contemporary developments, identifying various facets or patterns of India's regional engagement, and evaluating opportunities and challenges from a strategic perspective. This methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of India's evolving role in the Middle East.

Opportunities

• Indian Community (Diaspora) and Remittances

The large Indian community residing in the Gulf region represents a significant strategic asset for India. Indian professionals and workers contribute substantially to the economies of their host countries while simultaneously sending significant amounts of foreign currency back to India. These remittances support household incomes, boost domestic consumption, and strengthen India's balance of payments.

• Expansion of Trade and Investment

The Middle East has become a crucial economic partner for India. Over the past two decades, bilateral trade with Gulf nations has witnessed significant growth. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has emerged as a major trade hub and a leading investment partner for India. The India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) has imparted fresh momentum to trade; it has facilitated market access and boosted investment in sectors such as infrastructure, logistics, renewable energy, and digital technology. Sovereign Wealth Funds from Gulf nations are

investing heavily in India's transport networks, urban development projects, and emerging industries, thereby strengthening economic interdependence.

- **Energy Security and Strategic Partnership**

Energy security is a crucial component of India's key interests in the Middle East. India is one of the world's largest consumers of crude oil and natural gas, with a significant portion of these imports sourced from Gulf nations. Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar have emerged as vital energy partners for India. Long-term energy agreements provide India with stable supplies and opportunities for strategic cooperation. Investments in upstream oil exploration, refinery partnerships, and strategic petroleum reserves contribute to enhancing India's energy resilience and capabilities.

- **Defence and Security Cooperation**

India's Defence -related engagement with Middle Eastern countries has expanded significantly. Strategic partnerships have been strengthened through joint military exercises, intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and counter-terrorism cooperation. Israel has emerged as a key supplier of advanced Defence technologies, including surveillance systems, missile Defence equipment, and unmanned aerial vehicles. Gulf nations have also shown interest in enhancing Defence cooperation with India. This growing collaboration contributes to regional security and further bolsters India's Defence capabilities.

- **Maritime Security and Connectivity**

The Middle East occupies a pivotal position along major maritime trade routes. The Strait of Hormuz, the Strait of Bab-el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal are vital for global trade and energy transportation.

India's growing naval presence and maritime partnerships support freedom of navigation and secure maritime routes. Connectivity initiatives such as the Chabahar Port project and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor offer opportunities to expand the scope of trade and strengthen geopolitical influence. These projects significantly enhance India's connectivity with Middle Eastern nations.

- **Education Opportunities**

The Middle East also presents valuable opportunities for India's education sector. Indian universities and institutions can attract students from Middle Eastern countries by offering quality education in engineering, medicine, management, and information technology at competitive costs. Student and faculty exchange programs can enhance academic cooperation and promote knowledge sharing between the two regions. India can also expand its presence through online education platforms, professional certification courses, and skill-development

programs in fields such as artificial intelligence, healthcare, renewable energy, and digital technologies. These collaborations can improve India's global educational reputation, generate revenue, and strengthen long-term people-to-people connections between India and Middle Eastern nations.

Challenges

- **Regional Conflicts and Political Instability**

The Middle East is one of the world's volatile regions. Persistent instability stems from conflicts involving state and non-state actors, religious disputes, civil wars, and sectarian tensions. Escalating hostilities could disrupt energy supplies, threaten maritime trade routes, and endanger the lives of Indian citizens residing in the region. Consequently, political instability poses a significant challenge to India's interests.

- **Balancing Competing Relationships**

India's policy of maintaining strong ties with various regional actors gives rise to diplomatic complexities. While supporting the Palestinian cause, India also shares a strategic partnership with Israel. Similarly, despite their historical rivalry, India maintains friendly relations with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. Maintaining these relationships without alienating any party requires a careful balancing act and strategic autonomy.

- **China Growing Influence**

China's growing influence in the Middle East—driven by investments in infrastructure, trade agreements, and strategic partnerships—poses challenges for India. The Belt and Road Initiative has expanded China's regional presence, enabling Beijing to secure economic and political influence. To remain competitive, India needs to strengthen its partnerships and connectivity initiatives, and it is pursuing various avenues to achieve this.

- **Protection of Indians Abroad**

Ensuring the welfare and safety of Indian citizens during times of crisis is a major responsibility. Situations involving conflict and emergencies may necessitate large-scale evacuation operations and coordinated diplomatic responses. The safety of Indian workers abroad directly impacts India's domestic economic and political considerations. Protecting Indian citizens is India's primary duty; therefore, during crises, Indian citizens are brought back home through various operations.

- **Rivalry Among Superpowers**

Strategic competition among the USA, China, Russia, and regional players complicates the geopolitical landscape. To uphold its goal of strategic autonomy, India must navigate these rivalries without compromising its national interests.

Balancing cooperation with multiple powers while avoiding entanglement in their conflicts is a challenging task; to this end, India has sought to strike a balance by entering into trade agreements with various nations.

Conclusion and Analysis

The analysis reveals a significant transformation in India's relations with the Middle East. The traditional focus on energy security has evolved into a multidimensional strategy encompassing economic, strategic, technological, and diplomatic objectives. India's approach reflects pragmatism rather than ideological alignment. The country has successfully cultivated ties with diverse actors such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and Qatar. This ability to maintain simultaneous relations with rival powers demonstrates diplomatic flexibility.

Economic factors are increasingly shaping India's regional policy. Trade expansion, investment flows, and connectivity initiatives have emerged as key pillars of these relationships. Sovereign wealth investments and trade agreements involving Gulf nations contribute to India's developmental priorities. The Indian diaspora serves as a vital strategic asset. Beyond remittances, the diaspora fosters cultural exchange and business ties, thereby strengthening bilateral relations. However, the analysis also indicates that India's expanding interests are accompanied by growing vulnerabilities. Regional instability poses threats to energy supplies and maritime security. China's rising influence is intensifying strategic competition. Dependence on imported energy remains a structural weakness.

Overall, India's success in the Middle East hinges on its ability to maintain balanced diplomacy, diversify economic partnerships, and adapt to rapidly changing geopolitical realities—all of which serve its commercial interests.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

- **Strengthening Energy Diversification:** India should reduce its dependence on a limited number of suppliers by diversifying import sources and accelerating the development of renewable energy. This could help alleviate the economic burden.
- **Enhancing Maritime Capabilities:** Greater naval cooperation and investment in maritime infrastructure are essential to secure vital maritime routes and protect commercial interests.
- **Institutionalizing Protection Mechanisms for Indians Abroad:** Strengthening emergency response systems and labor welfare agreements would improve the support available to Indian citizens overseas.

- **Deepening Economic Integration:** India should pursue additional trade agreements with Middle Eastern countries and encourage further investment partnerships.

Conclusion

Given the strategic, economic, and geopolitical significance of the Middle East, the region holds a central place in India's contemporary foreign policy. India's engagement with the region has evolved beyond mere oil imports into a comprehensive partnership spanning diverse sectors such as trade, investment, Defence cooperation, maritime security, intelligence sharing, technology, and people-to-people ties. The region offers immense opportunities to advance India's national interests. Expanding economic partnerships, enhancing connectivity initiatives, and fostering cooperation in Defence and renewable energy can further strengthen India's stature as an emerging global power. The large Indian diaspora residing in the region reinforces these ties and contributes significantly to India's economy. At the same time, India faces significant challenges arising from regional instability, energy dependence, geopolitical conflicts, and great-power rivalry. Preserving strategic autonomy while balancing relations with regional actors holding conflicting interests requires nuanced diplomacy and policy consistency.

India's future role in the Middle East will depend on its ability to adapt to the evolving geopolitical landscape, diversify strategic partnerships, and adopt an integrated approach that harmonizes economic ties with security cooperation. By leveraging available opportunities and effectively managing risks, India can establish itself as a constructive and influential force contributing to peace, stability, and prosperity in the Middle East.

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Iran–Saudi Arabia Rivalry

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Abstract

The Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict is considered one of the most significant geopolitical rivalries in the Middle East. The roots of this conflict lie in religious, political, economic, and strategic competition. Iran is regarded as the leading supporter of the Shia sect, while Saudi Arabia is recognized as the leader of the Sunni sect. Tensions between the two countries intensified after the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. Since then, both nations have competed for regional influence and leadership in the Middle East. Their indirect involvement can be observed in conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Control over oil resources and energy markets has also been a major factor behind the rivalry. The conflict has created several challenges to regional security and has affected global oil prices. Major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China have played various roles in this rivalry. In 2023, China facilitated the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two countries, creating new possibilities for regional peace. However, historical differences and mutual distrust continue to persist. Therefore, the long-term consequences of this conflict will continue to influence Middle Eastern stability and global politics. In this context, the study of the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict is highly significant for understanding international relations.

Introduction

The Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict is one of the most important and complex issues in Middle Eastern politics. Its roots are embedded in religious, political, economic, and

strategic competition. Iran is considered the principal representative of Shia Islam, whereas Saudi Arabia is widely recognized as a leading Sunni state. These religious differences have contributed to long-standing tensions between the two countries. The conflict intensified significantly after the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979. Following the revolution, Iran sought to expand its regional influence, while Saudi Arabia attempted to counterbalance it. Both countries have competed for regional leadership in the Middle East. The effects of this rivalry are visible in countries such as Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. In these conflicts, both nations have supported different political and military groups. As a result, regional stability has been seriously affected. The vast reserves of oil and natural gas in the region have also given this conflict considerable economic importance. The rivalry directly impacts global energy security. Major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China have played significant roles in shaping the conflict, making it not merely a regional issue but an international one. In 2023, China mediated efforts to restore diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia. These developments have opened new possibilities for peace and cooperation. Nevertheless, mutual distrust and historical grievances remain unresolved. Therefore, studying the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict is essential for understanding Middle Eastern politics, security, and international relations.

Research Objectives

- To understand the causes of the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict.
- To examine the religious and political factors involved in the conflict.
- To analyze the regional consequences of the conflict in the Middle East.
- To study its impact on energy security.
- To evaluate the role of major powers in the conflict.
- To identify the opportunities and challenges arising from the rivalry.
- To understand the future prospects of Iran–Saudi Arabia relations.

Research Questions

- What are the major causes of the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict?
- To what extent do religious differences influence the conflict?
- What impact has the conflict had on Middle Eastern politics?
- How does the conflict affect global energy security?
- Can stable relations be established between the two countries in the future?

Research Methodology

This study employs descriptive and analytical research methods. Various books, research articles, and academic literature related to the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict have been examined. Historical events associated with the conflict have been analyzed. Reports from national and international institutions have been reviewed. Government documents and foreign policy reports have been studied. Information

has also been collected from newspapers, journals, and reliable online sources. Comparative analysis has been conducted on the causes, consequences, opportunities, and challenges of the conflict. The study also examines its impact on various Middle Eastern countries. Information regarding energy security and regional stability has been evaluated. Objective conclusions have been drawn based on available secondary data. This methodology has enabled a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the subject.

Opportunities

The restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia offers significant opportunities for regional peace and stability. Improved relations can help reduce tensions across the Middle East. Greater cooperation may contribute to resolving conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Enhanced diplomatic engagement can strengthen regional security mechanisms. Economic cooperation between the two countries can increase trade and investment opportunities. Stable relations may improve energy market stability and reduce fluctuations in oil prices. Joint initiatives can support regional development and infrastructure projects. Improved relations can reduce sectarian tensions between Shia and Sunni communities. The normalization process may encourage greater cooperation among Gulf states. It can also reduce the burden of military expenditures and promote economic growth. China's mediation has demonstrated the potential of diplomatic dialogue in conflict resolution. Stronger relations may contribute to collective responses to terrorism and extremism. Enhanced cooperation can strengthen regional institutions and multilateral frameworks. The conflict also provides valuable lessons for international diplomacy and peacebuilding. If sustained, reconciliation could create a more stable and prosperous Middle East.

Challenges

The Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict faces numerous serious challenges. Historical sectarian divisions between Shia and Sunni communities remain a major obstacle. Mutual distrust has persisted for decades. Competition for regional leadership continues to fuel tensions. The conflict in Yemen remains unresolved. Rivalry for influence in Syria and Iraq continues to affect bilateral relations. Political divisions in Lebanon further complicate the situation. Competition in oil production and energy markets influences strategic decision-making. The involvement of major powers, including the United States, often adds complexity to the conflict. Achieving consensus on security and defense issues remains difficult. The threat of terrorism and extremist organizations continues to persist. Religious radicalism and sectarian sentiments may obstruct peace efforts. The interests of regional allies can intensify tensions. Changes in political leadership may create policy uncertainty. Economic sanctions and international pressure also affect relations. Maintaining continuity in diplomatic dialogue is a significant challenge. Building mutual trust

requires sustained long-term efforts. Consequently, achieving a permanent resolution to the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict remains one of the most difficult challenges facing the Middle East.

Conclusion and Analysis

The Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict is one of the most influential and long-standing rivalries in the Middle East. Its causes are not limited to religious differences but also involve political, economic, and strategic factors. The Shia–Sunni divide provides an important historical background to the conflict. Both countries seek to expand their influence and leadership in the region. This competition has contributed to persistent instability in Middle Eastern politics. Its effects are particularly evident in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Competition over oil resources and energy markets has further intensified the rivalry. The conflict has had significant implications for global energy security. Fluctuations in oil prices have affected the global economy. The involvement of major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China has made the conflict more complex. Nevertheless, recent diplomatic initiatives have shown signs of improving bilateral relations. China’s mediation has helped facilitate the restoration of diplomatic ties. These developments have increased prospects for peace and stability in the region. However, mutual distrust and historical grievances have not been completely eliminated. Long-term peace requires cooperation, confidence-building, and sustained dialogue. Economic and diplomatic engagement can help reduce tensions. The constructive participation of both countries will be essential for regional security. Therefore, resolving the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict is crucial for stability, development, and peace in the Middle East and beyond.

Conclusion

The Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict is a major issue in Middle Eastern politics. Its roots lie in religious, political, economic, and strategic factors. Differences between the Shia and Sunni sects have given the conflict a strong historical dimension. Both countries continue to compete for regional leadership. This rivalry has contributed to instability across several Middle Eastern states. Its impact is particularly visible in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Oil resources and energy security concerns have further increased the significance of the conflict. The rivalry also affects the global economy. The involvement of major powers has added further complexity to the situation. Nevertheless, diplomatic initiatives and dialogue have sought to reduce tensions. In recent years, both countries have shown a willingness to improve relations. This has created new opportunities for regional peace. However, historical grievances and mutual distrust remain significant barriers. Sustainable stability requires cooperation, dialogue, and confidence-building measures. Greater coordination in economic, diplomatic, and security affairs is essential. Both countries must play constructive roles in promoting regional development.

Therefore, a peaceful resolution of the Iran–Saudi Arabia conflict is vital for regional and global stability.

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Bab-el-Mandeb Military Conflict in the Strait: The Spread of Sophisticated Drone Technology and the Challenge of Global Energy Security

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Introduction

Strategic maritime chokepoints are of paramount importance in global geopolitics. The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, which connects the Red Sea to the Arabian Sea via the Gulf of Aden, is one of the most sensitive and strategic corridors in international trade. It serves as a vital conduit for maritime commerce between Asia and Europe, particularly for the transit of crude oil and natural gas exported from the Gulf states. However, contemporary geopolitical instability in the Middle East has driven a rapid militarization of this region, posing a severe and immediate challenge to global energy security.

Traditional paradigms of naval combat are increasingly being superseded by hybrid and asymmetric warfare. Following the escalation of the Israel-Hamas conflict in late 2023, regional tensions have surged, prompting non-state actors—such as the Houthi rebels in Yemen—to intervene directly in the broader geopolitical theater. Notably, these groups now wield sophisticated weaponry previously reserved exclusively for the militaries of advanced nation-states. They are actively deploying Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), loitering munitions, and Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles (ASBMs) to execute targeted strikes on commercial cargo vessels and oil tankers.

This democratization and proliferation of advanced military technology pose a critical threat to global supply chains. The persistent maritime attacks have compelled major international shipping conglomerates to drastically alter their transit routes, forcing them to abandon the Red Sea and undertake the lengthy

detour around the African continent via the Cape of Good Hope. Consequently, this logistical disruption has triggered severe volatility in global energy markets and heightened the risk of widespread inflation. Against this backdrop, this paper provides an in-depth, factual analysis of the evolving military reality in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and examines the profound implications of advanced drone and missile technologies on global energy security.

Research Objectives

This study is guided by the following primary objectives:

- **To Identify and Analyze Active Groups and Their Interests:** To identify the non-state armed groups (such as the Houthi rebels) operating in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and analyze the geopolitical and strategic interests of the regional powers that sponsor and support them.
- **To Examine the Nature of the Conflict:** To study the evolving military dynamics in the Bab-el-Mandeb region, specifically focusing on the paradigm shift from traditional naval warfare to the utilization of hybrid and asymmetric military tactics.
- **To Assess Impacts on Energy Security and Supply Chains:** To evaluate the immediate and long-term consequences that the proliferation of sophisticated drone (UAV) and missile technologies has on the disruption of global supply chains and international energy security.

Data and Methodology

This research is fundamentally grounded in a qualitative and analytical methodology.

To comprehensively understand the complex military conflict in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the study employs a multi-disciplinary approach—incorporating historical, geopolitical, and strategic perspectives. This framework is utilized to evaluate the growing operational influence of non-state actors and their cascading implications for global energy security.

Data collection for this paper relies predominantly on secondary sources. Factual information and statistical data have been rigorously compiled from the following institutional and official sources:

- **Military and Maritime Security Reports:** Official situation reports from the United States Central Command (US CENTCOM) and maritime security updates from the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) were utilized to track and verify specific vessel attacks and drone deployments in the Bab-el-Mandeb corridor.
- **Defence Research Institute Data:** To analyze the regional proliferation of advanced weaponry and drone technology, this study incorporates data and strategic analyses from recognized global think-tanks, notably the Stockholm

International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

- **Economic and Energy Statistics:** Reports from the International Energy Agency (IEA) and major global shipping conglomerates (e.g., Maersk, Hapag-Lloyd) were evaluated to quantify the disruption to the global fuel supply chain, the operational impacts of Red Sea rerouting, and the subsequent surge in maritime transportation costs.
- **Academic References:** The research is further substantiated by peer-reviewed defence journals and policy studies focusing on hybrid warfare and international relations within the Middle East.

Key Belligerents and Strategic Motivations: The Houthi Movement (Ansar Allah).

The current maritime conflict in the Red Sea is primarily driven by the Houthi movement, an armed political and religious non-state actor based in Yemen. Officially operating under the name Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), the group originated in the northern provinces of Yemen. The Houthis are adherents of the Zaydi branch of Shia Islam, a demographic that comprises approximately one-third of Yemen's total population. The movement initially emerged in the 1990s as a theological and political reaction against the growing regional influence of Saudi-backed Wahhabi and Salafi ideologies, seeking to defend and revive Zaydi cultural traditions. The group's founder, Husayn Badr al-Din al-Houthi, led an armed rebellion against the central Yemeni government in 2004, which culminated in his death. Following his assassination, the insurgent group became colloquially known as the 'Houthis' in his honor. The organization is currently led by his brother, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi.

The ideological foundation of the Houthi movement is fiercely anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist. This stance is explicitly codified in their official slogan (The Sarkha): 'God is the greatest, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam.' Geopolitically, the Houthis function as a critical component of the Iranian-led 'Axis of Resistance.' Tehran provides the group with extensive financial backing, advanced military technology, and tactical training. Consequently, the Houthis heavily model their organizational and military frameworks on other regional proxies, most notably Lebanon's Hezbollah.

While the Houthis cite solidarity with Palestine amid the ongoing conflict in Gaza as the primary justification for their maritime operations, this serves largely as an ostensible motive. From a broader geopolitical perspective, their strategic objectives are significantly more ambitious. By demonstrating the capacity to disrupt navigation through a vital global chokepoint like the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, the Houthis aim to exert leverage over international trade routes. Ultimately, Iranian

patronage has empowered a geographically isolated non-state actor with the asymmetric military capabilities required to project regional power and force strategic negotiations with global superpowers.

The Evolving Character of Warfare: Asymmetric and Hybrid Dynamics.

Conventional warfare traditionally involves symmetric engagements between sovereign nation-states possessing comparable military capabilities. In contrast, the current conflict in the Red Sea represents a textbook example of asymmetric warfare, characterized by a stark disparity in military power between multinational naval coalitions (such as those led by the United States and the United Kingdom) and a non-state actor like the Houthi movement.

Rather than engaging in direct, conventional combat, the Houthis employ hybrid warfare—a strategic synthesis of irregular guerrilla tactics, covert operations, and the deployment of advanced military technology.

Cost Asymmetry and the Economics of Interception

The most profound strategic challenge in this maritime theatre is the severe economic disproportion of tactical engagements. Houthi forces frequently utilize low-cost, one-way attack munitions, commonly referred to as ‘kamikaze’ drones, which can be manufactured for approximately \$20,000 per unit. Conversely, to neutralize these inexpensive aerial threats, American and British naval vessels are compelled to launch highly sophisticated surface-to-air interceptor missiles. A single interceptor typically costs between \$2 million and \$3 million, creating a highly unsustainable economic exchange ratio for the defending navies.

The Strategy of Military Exhaustion

Consequently, the rebels’ primary objective is not to defeat superpower navies in direct combat. Rather, they aim to wage a war of attrition designed to exhaust these nations financially and psychologically. Their main strategy relies on deploying vast quantities of inexpensive drones to rapidly deplete the advanced countries’ costly interceptor missiles and severely strain their international logistical networks.

The Changing Nature of the Military Conflict at Bab-el-Mandeb

1. The Shift from Conventional to Asymmetric and Hybrid Warfare Historically, maritime conflicts predominantly involved conventional, state-on-state engagements between the official navies of sovereign nations. These were symmetric, head-to-head battles relying on direct combat between warships, submarines, and fighter aircraft.

Today, this paradigm has shifted toward asymmetric warfare, pitting non-state actors (such as Houthi rebels) against multinational naval coalitions (such as U.S. and U.K. forces). Rather than engaging in traditional, face-to-face combat, these non-state groups employ maritime guerrilla tactics and hit-and-run strikes

launched from land-based positions. This represents a form of hybrid warfare, combining advanced anti-ship technology with covert, irregular operational tactics.

2. **The Democratization of Lethal Technology** A defining feature of this contemporary conflict is the unprecedented access non-state actors now have to sophisticated weaponry.

Historically, advanced capabilities such as ballistic missiles were strictly confined to the arsenals of developed nation-states.

Today, however, groups like the Houthi rebels are actively deploying Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles (ASBMs) against commercial maritime traffic. Notably, this marks the first instance in the history of naval warfare where a non-state actor has successfully fielded ASBMs.

Furthermore, the widespread integration of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and Uncrewed Surface Vessels (USVs, or “drone boats”) is fundamentally altering the maritime battlespace, rendering these asymmetric conflicts highly technological and increasingly lethal.

3. **Cost Asymmetry and the War of Attrition** The sheer cost disparity between offensive and defensive weaponry represents the most critical economic and strategic challenge in the evolving maritime landscape. Houthi forces frequently employ inexpensive, one-way “kamikaze” attack drones, such as the Shahed-136, which cost an estimated \$20,000 per unit to produce.

In stark contrast, neutralizing these low-tier threats requires American and European warships to launch highly advanced interceptor missiles—such as the Standard Missile-2 (SM-2)—which cost between \$2 million and \$3 million per shot. Consequently, the primary operational objective of these non-state actors is not to achieve a conventional military victory over superpower navies. Instead, they are executing a calculated war of attrition designed to impose unsustainable financial costs and rapidly deplete the advanced munitions stockpiles of their adversaries.

4. **Targeting Economic Centers of Gravity** In conventional naval warfare, belligerents primarily focus their offensives on enemy military installations or warships. In the current conflict, however, Houthi rebels have deliberately shifted their focus toward commercial shipping, specifically targeting global cargo vessels and oil tankers.

Rather than exclusively engaging well-defended multinational naval task forces, their strategy aims to disrupt global supply chains and threaten international energy security. By striking these economic centers of gravity, non-state actors can exert disproportionate economic and political pressure on the international

community, representing a significant paradigm shift in modern maritime struggles.

5. **The Weaponization of Geography and Strategic Chokepoints** The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait—a narrow maritime corridor measuring just 26 kilometers wide between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula—serves as a critical artery for global maritime trade. The rebels have effectively weaponized this geographic & “chokepoint.”

By deploying short-range radar systems and Coastal Defense Cruise Missiles (CDCMs) from the shoreline, they project a credible threat over a vast maritime domain at a minimal financial cost. This tactical exploitation of geography stands as a textbook modern example of a “Sea Denial” strategy, demonstrating how non-state actors can leverage terrain to restrict international freedom of navigation.

Energy Security and Supply Chain Disruptions

- **Geographical Vulnerability:** The Bab-el-Mandeb Strait is a highly constricted maritime corridor connecting the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and the broader Arabian Sea. It serves as a vital artery for global commerce, facilitating approximately 12% of total international maritime trade. Crucially, it is the primary transit route for millions of barrels of crude oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG) flowing between the Persian Gulf, Asia, and Europe.
- **Rerouting and Operational Delays:** Persistent threats from unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and anti-ship ballistic missiles have compelled major global shipping conglomerates, such as Maersk, to largely abandon this efficient transit corridor. Consequently, vessels are now forced into massive geographical detours, circumnavigating the African continent via the Cape of Good Hope.
- **Economic Strain and Inflationary Pressures:** The Cape of Good Hope diversion adds approximately 10 to 15 days of transit time per voyage. This extended routing dramatically increases operational overhead, including fuel consumption, crew wages, and exorbitant war-risk insurance premiums. These logistical bottlenecks directly impair the global energy supply chain, delaying the delivery of critical oil and gas to European and Asian markets and posing a severe threat to international energy security.

Ultimately, these compounding transportation and operational costs are passed down the supply chain, significantly increasing the likelihood of widespread global inflation.

Conclusion

The following key conclusions can be drawn from an analysis of the geopolitical dynamics and asymmetric military conflict in the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait:

- **The Democratization of Technology:** In the contemporary security environment, advanced weaponry is no longer the exclusive monopoly of sovereign states. The proliferation and accessibility of low-cost drone and missile technologies have empowered non-state actors with the strategic capability to challenge superpower militaries and disrupt global supply chains.
- **Limitations of Traditional Military Strategies:** In this new era of asymmetric warfare, relying on traditional naval tactics—specifically, utilizing multi-million-dollar interceptor missiles to neutralize low-cost drones—is financially unsustainable and strategically unviable in the long term. Consequently, multinational naval coalitions must rapidly pivot toward more cost-effective countermeasures, such as Directed-Energy Weapons (DEWs) and advanced electronic warfare systems.
- **Threats to Global Energy Security:** The disruption of maritime traffic in the Red Sea has severely undermined global energy security. The extended transit times and inflated shipping costs caused by rerouting have introduced significant volatility into international energy markets. Ultimately, these compounding economic pressures disproportionately burden the economies of developing nations.
- **The Insufficiency of Purely Military Solutions:** While intercepting drone and missile strikes provides a temporary tactical defence, military force alone cannot permanently resolve the underlying strategic crisis. To achieve lasting maritime security, the international community must address the historical and geopolitical roots of this instability through robust, comprehensive diplomatic initiatives.

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Geo-Politics Study of West Asia and the Middle East Asia

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Abstract

This study provides an exhaustive geopolitical and macro-developmental analysis of West Asia, evaluating the structural transformations that have unfolded in the regional security complex between 2023 and mid-2026. Adopting Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory as an analytical framework, the research examines the systemic erosion of traditional forward deterrence paradigms, culminating in the historic collapse of the Syrian Assad regime in December 2024, the military confrontations of the June 2025 Twelve-Day War, and the joint US-Israeli strategic strikes of February 28, 2026, known as Operation Epic Fury. The paper integrates quantitative datasets from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), the Energy Institute's Statistical Review of World Energy, and the World Bank Group's June 2026 Global Economic Prospects report to analyze the multi-dimensional impacts of these kinetic events. The findings indicate that the de facto closure of the Strait of Hormuz in March 2026 triggered a structural regime shift in global oil market volatility, decelerated global GDP growth to a post-pandemic low of 2.5%, and catalyzed a rapid realignment of great-power strategy. The paper concludes that West Asia has transitioned from a standard regional security complex managed by state-sponsored proxy rivalries toward a highly fragmented, multipolar conflict formation characterized by domestic institutional collapse, asymmetric warfare, and deep external penetration by the United States, China, and India.

Keywords: West Asia, Regional Security Complex, Operation Epic Fury, Petro-hegemony, Geopolitical Volatility

Introduction

West Asia, historically designated in Western discourse as the Middle East, represents one of the most critical geostrategic, economic, and maritime junctions in the global political economy. Situated at the intercontinental convergence of Asia, Africa, and Europe, the region's geopolitical prominence is structurally anchored in its vast natural resource endowments. West Asia contains approximately 48% of the world's proven petroleum reserves and 40% of its proven natural gas reserves, positioning it at the absolute center of global energy markets. Consequently, the preservation of regional stability and the uninterrupted flow of maritime commerce through its primary maritime choke points most notably the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb have long been designated as vital national security interests by both regional states and major global powers.

For nearly two decades following the end of the Cold War, the regional power dynamics of West Asia were characterized by a relative equilibrium dominated by the unilateral military and diplomatic hegemony of the United States, which acted as an uncontested external "overlay". This period of US dominance suppressed overt interstate competition, allowing Washington to manage regional security through strategic alliances and selective containment policies. However, the gradual retrenchment of US ground forces—symbolized by the chaotic military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021—coincided with the rise of a highly assertive, multipolar regional order. Regional powers such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, and Israel increasingly sought to project power independently, giving rise to a dense network of proxy conflicts and sectarian rivalries.

Between late 2023 and mid-2026, this transitional order was shattered by a sequence of systemic shocks. The militarized escalation that followed the events of October 7, 2023, systematically eroded the "forward deterrence" architecture established by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The subsequent collapse of the Bashar al-Assad regime in Damascus in December 2024 severed the critical land corridor linking the Iranian state to its Levant proxies, culminating in a profound power vacuum. This structural decay of deterrence set the stage for direct state-to-state military confrontations, including the Twelve-Day War of June 2025 and the massive joint US-Israeli strikes of February 28, 2026, designated as Operation Epic Fury.

This study provides an exhaustive investigation into these contemporary geopolitical dynamics, analyzing the structural variables driving conflict, the shifting parameters of defense economics, and the systemic feedback loops connecting regional instability to global macroeconomic performance. By integrating qualitative theoretical models with the latest empirical economic and

defense databases, the paper offers a comprehensive diagnostic of the new West Asian regional order.

Reviews of Literature

The geopolitical dynamics of West Asia have generated a rich body of academic scholarship. This literature review synthesizes the core theoretical paradigms and empirical findings from foundational texts and contemporary peer-reviewed analyses, identifying their contributions to understanding regional conflict, resource competition, and security interdependence.

Cordesman (2019) investigates the strategic significance of maritime chokepoints in West Asia, focusing on the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal. The author argues that the global political economy's dependency on West Asian hydrocarbons elevates these narrow waterways into critical vectors of military leverage and asymmetric warfare. Cordesman highlights how non-state actors and regional powers utilize the threat of maritime blockades—such as Iran's historical rhetorical and physical threats to close the Strait of Hormuz—to offset conventional military disadvantages. However, the analysis is critiqued for focusing predominantly on major-power interactions, thereby neglecting how smaller, non-aligned states like Oman leverage their geographic proximity to these chokepoints to maintain diplomatic neutrality and preserve sovereign autonomy.

Gause (2017) conceptualizes the modern geopolitical rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran through the lens of a regional “New Cold War”. Moving away from purely primordialist explanations of Sunni-Shia sectarianism, Gause demonstrates that the bilateral competition is fundamentally a struggle for regional hegemony, characterized by the exploitation of weak state structures in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. The author posits that the primary mechanism of power projection in this conflict is proxy warfare, where both Riyadh and Tehran mobilize local sub-state clients to alter the regional balance of power without engaging in direct, conventional state-to-state military conflict.

Ulrichsen (2020) examines the foreign policy transformations of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, with a specific focus on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Ulrichsen argues that the perceived retrenchment of the United States as a security guarantor has driven Gulf monarchies to adopt highly assertive, interventionist, and securitized foreign policies. However, the author critiques these strategies—particularly Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen and the diplomatic blockade of Qatar—for prioritizing short-term regime security and dynastic consolidation over long-term, institutionalized regional stability.

Hashemi and Postel (2018) challenge the conventional narrative of sectarianism in West Asian conflict studies. They argue that the Sunni-Shia divide is not an immutable, ancient hatred but rather a highly politicized, modern phenomenon

constructed and instrumentalized by authoritarian regimes. Through detailed case studies, the authors illustrate how state elites actively “securitize” religious identity to deflect domestic socio-economic grievances, mobilize political support, and legitimize authoritarian governance models. This perspective is supported by Dodge (2020), who demonstrates how the post-2003 institutional design in Iraq, based on ethnic and sectarian power-sharing (the Muhasasa system), systematically institutionalized sectarian friction and hollowed out state capacity.

Buzan and Wæver (2003) establish the theoretical foundation for analyzing these dynamics through their Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). RSCT posits that because security threats travel more easily over short distances than long ones, international security must be analyzed at the regional level, where states are locked in geographically clustered patterns of security interdependence. The authors categorize the Middle East as a “standard” regional security complex, meaning its polarity is determined by regional powers rather than an external superpower “overlay”. Buzan and Wæver highlight that the region is historically defined by a high density of “enmities,” where regional actors are structurally incapable of resolving their security dilemmas, rendering the complex highly vulnerable to external penetration.

Objectives of the Study

This research paper aims to achieve a series of interconnected academic objectives to clarify the contemporary structural transition in West Asia.

- To analyze the structural reordering of the West Asian regional security complex between 2024 and 2026, evaluating the collapse of traditional proxy-driven deterrence paradigms and the subsequent escalation to direct, state-to-state conventional and asymmetric warfare. This involves identifying the domestic, regional, and global variables that converted a long-standing “cold war” into active military conflicts.
- To investigate the fiscal and economic transformations within key regional powers, utilizing empirical military expenditure data to assess the shifting balance of defense capabilities. By examining the defense budgets of Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, and Iran, the study demonstrates how domestic economic constraints and external military assistance shape state capacity and strategic behavior.
- To evaluate the systemic impact of the 2026 West Asian crisis on global energy security and macroeconomic performance, focusing on the de facto closure of the Strait of Hormuz and subsequent World Bank growth and inflation projections. This objective requires tracing the transmission channels through which localized military operations generate global supply-chain shocks, fertilizer shortages, and fiscal stress in developing economies.

- To assesses the strategic role of external great powers specifically the United States, China, and India in navigating and penetrating the reordered regional security complex. By analyzing the distinct geopolitical motivations and vulnerabilities of these global actors, the emerging multipolar alignment dynamics defining the contemporary international order.

Database and Methodological Framework

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating qualitative theoretical analysis with quantitative economic and defense data. The qualitative dimension of the paper is structured around Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver's Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT). RSCT provides a systematic four-tiered framework for evaluating security dynamics:

- **The Domestic Level:** Analyzing internal political stability, regime legitimacy, and sub-state vulnerabilities.
- **The Regional (State-to-State) Level:** Assessing the polarity, patterns of amity and enmity, and security interdependence between local powers.
- **The Inter-regional Level:** Evaluating the security externalities and spillover effects between adjacent regional complexes.
- **The Global Level:** Investigating the mechanism of penetration by external global superpowers and great powers.

The quantitative dimension of the study is constructed using empirical datasets retrieved from three authoritative, globally recognized organizations:

- **The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 2026:** Used to extract standardized, real-term military expenditure figures, defense budget growth rates, and arms procurement data for the fiscal year 2025.
- **The Energy Institute (EI) Statistical Review of World Energy (formerly the BP Statistical Review):** Utilized to compile data on proven oil and gas reserves, regional hydrocarbon production volumes, refining capacities, and maritime energy trade flows.
- **The World Bank Group Global Economic Prospects (June 11, 2026 Update):** Used to retrieve macroeconomic growth projections (GDP), global inflation forecasts, commodity price indices, and debt-to-GDP ratios affected by the West Asian conflict.

Result and Discussion

The Structural Decay of Regional Deterrence (2024–2025)

The regional security complex of West Asia underwent a profound, structural transformation between late 2023 and the end of 2025, driven by the systematic erosion of the “Axis of Resistance” deterrence paradigm. Historically, the Islamic Republic of Iran compensated for its conventional military limitations by

constructing a dense network of non-state armed actors across the Levant and the Arabian Peninsula. This forward deterrence architecture was designed to project power to the borders of Israel and the Persian Gulf, thereby deterring direct attacks on the Iranian homeland.

However, the military campaigns initiated in response to the October 7, 2023, attacks systematically dismantled this defensive posture. Throughout 2024, Israeli operations executed a highly effective decapitation campaign against Iran's key regional proxies. The assassinations of Lebanese Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Abbas Nilforoushan in late 2024 represented a critical inflection point, depriving the Axis of Resistance of its most experienced strategic leadership.

This degradation of proxy capabilities was compounded by a monumental geopolitical shift in Syria. In December 2024, the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime—weakened by years of civil conflict and the severe attrition of Hezbollah forces—shattered the geographic contiguity of the Axis of Resistance. The rise of a new governing coalition in Damascus, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa, effectively severed the land corridor through which Iran had historically supplied sophisticated weaponry and financial assets to Lebanese Hezbollah.

With Hamas functionally dismantled as a coherent military force in Gaza, and the Houthis in Yemen facing acute supply chain disruptions, Iran entered 2025 in a state of unprecedented strategic exposure, its regional deterrence architecture severely degraded.

1. The Twelve-Day War and the Path to Operation Epic Fury (2025-2026)

This structural vulnerability invited direct, conventional state-to-state military confrontation. On June 13, 2025, following the expiration of critical international deadlines regarding Iran's uranium enrichment activities, Israel launched a pre-emptive conventional campaign designated Operation Rising Lion. The initial phase of the conflict involved an unprecedented air campaign: over 200 Israeli Air Force fighter jets executed five waves of airstrikes in the opening hours, deploying more than 330 precision-guided munitions against approximately 100 targets, including military bases, command-and-control centers, and regime infrastructure. Simultaneously, a covert Mossad operation, Operation Red Wedding, assassinated thirty senior Iranian generals and nine leading nuclear scientists within the opening minutes of the war.

The United States provided substantial operational and defensive support during the conflict. The US Navy deployed five Arleigh Burke-class destroyers to the Eastern Mediterranean to establish a robust anti-ballistic missile defense screen, while US Air Force strategic bombers executed strikes on heavily fortified underground nuclear enrichment sites at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahantargets that exceeded the conventional penetration capabilities of the Israeli Air Force. In response to the

strikes, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Board of Governors passed its first resolution since 2005 declaring Iran in formal non-compliance with its nuclear obligations.

Although a ceasefire was brokered on June 24, 2025 christened the “Twelve-Day War” by President Donald Trump the structural drivers of the conflict remained entirely unresolved. The strikes had temporarily set back Iran's enrichment timeline by an estimated two years, but the regime’s highly enriched uranium stockpile remained largely intact, buried under heavily reinforced subterranean bunkers.

The fragile “armed peace” of late 2025 completely collapsed in early 2026. In January 2026, the IAEA confirmed that Iran had successfully concealed a significant volume of highly enriched uranium in an undisclosed, ultra-deep underground facility that had escaped damage during the June 2025 strikes. This technical discovery, coinciding with the collapse of indirect diplomatic channels in Geneva and Oman, provided the *casus belli* for a decisive joint military campaign.

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched Operation Epic Fury. This campaign was designed not as a limited counter-proliferation strike, but as a systematic effort to achieve the functional decapitation of the Iranian state, the permanent neutralization of its nuclear and ballistic missile infrastructure, and implicit regime change. Within the first twelve hours of the operation, coalition forces executed nearly 900 coordinated air, missile, and cyber strikes. The opening wave successfully targeted the senior leadership of the Islamic Republic, resulting in the assassination of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and dozens of top clerics and IRGC commanders.

The strikes also resulted in severe collateral damage, including the tragic deaths of approximately 170 civilians at an elementary school in the southern city of Minab.

The military decapitation triggered an immediate, highly asymmetric regional response. The remnants of the IRGC launched waves of retaliatory ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and one-way attack drones targeting at least 27 US military facilities and installations across nine countries, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Jordan, and Iraq. Demonstrating long-range capabilities that exceeded Western intelligence estimates, Iran also attempted to strike the joint US-UK strategic military base at Diego Garcia in the British Indian Ocean Territory, some 2,500 miles away.

Inside Iran, the kinetic campaign acted as a catalyst for the “Winter Uprising,” a nationwide domestic rebellion fueled by systemic economic collapse, hyperinflation, and the sudden vacuum in clerical authority.

2. Quantitative Analysis of Regional Defense Budgets

The intense geopolitical volatility of the 2024–2026 period is reflected in the shifting defense economics of the primary West Asian powers. According to comprehensive data released by the Stockholm International Peace Research

Institute (SIPRI), military expenditure in the Middle East reached an estimated \$218 billion in 2025. This figure represents a minimal real-term growth rate of just 0.1% compared to the unprecedented 15% spending surge recorded in 2024, indicating that many regional defense budgets plateaued as states adjusted to a highly volatile baseline.

However, looking at the decadal trend from 2016 to 2025, military spending in West Asia expanded by 36%, reflecting the long-term, systemic militarization of the region's security architecture.

The individual country data reveals contrasting strategic priorities and economic constraints. Saudi Arabia remained the dominant military spender in the region, allocating an estimated \$83.2 billion to defense in 2025. This represents a 1.4% increase over 2024, placing the Kingdom as the eighth-largest military spender globally.

Riyadh's high spending was driven by its ongoing efforts to modernize its air combat fleets, expand its Patriot and THAAD missile defense networks, and finance the localized defense-industrial targets outlined in Vision 2030. This sustained investment occurred despite a widening fiscal deficit of 5.6% of GDP, as the Saudi leadership prioritized national security and infrastructure development over immediate fiscal cushions.

Table No. 1.1: Regional Defense Budgets

Country / Region	2025 Military Expenditure (USD)	YoY Real Growth Rate (2024–2025)	Decadal Growth (2016–2025)	Share of Regional Spend (%)	Key Drivers & Strategic Off-Budget Mechanics
Saudi Arabia	\$83.2 Billion	+1.4%	+12%	38.2%	Air force modernization, expanding national missile defense, Vision 2030 domestic localization. High data opacity.
Israel	\$48.3 Billion	-4.9%	+120%	22.2%	Reflects Gaza ceasefire baseline (Jan 2025). Supported by \$3.8B in annual US military assistance.

Turkey	\$30.0 Billion	+7.2%	+94%	13.8%	Operations in Syria, Iraq, and Somalia. 22% (\$6.6B) allocated to domestic arms industry support fund.
Iran	\$7.4 Billion	-5.6%	-0.9%	3.4%	Real-term decline due to >40% inflation. 40% of procurement (drones/missiles) funded off-budget via oil revenues.
Other Regional States	\$49.1 Billion	N/A	N/A	22.4%	Combined defense outlays of Iraq, GCC monarchies, Jordan, Syria, and Yemen.
Middle East Total	\$218.0 Billion	+0.1%	+36%	100.0%	Shift from crisis management to prolonged state-level conventional readiness.

Source: Compiled from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 2026 / April 2026 Defense Expenditure Database.

Israel's military expenditure was recorded at \$48.3 billion in 2025, marking a 4.9% decline compared to the peak war-fighting budget of 2024. SIPRI attributes this modest contraction to the temporary reduction in kinetic intensity following the January 2025 ceasefire agreement with Hamas in Gaza.

However, illustrating the permanent upward shift in Israel's security posture, the 2025 budget remained 97% higher than the pre-war baseline of 2022 and 120% higher than in 2016. This elevated defense floor was structurally underpinned by \$3.8 billion in direct US military assistance.

Turkey's military budget expanded by 7.2% in 2025 to reach \$30.0 billion, a 94% increase compared to 2016. Ankara's spending surge was driven by sustained cross-border counter-terrorism and power-projection operations in northern Syria and northern Iraq, its military presence in Somalia, and significant state capital injections into its domestic defense sector. Notably, allocations to a specialized state fund supporting Turkish defense firms grew by 25% year-on-year, accounting for

22% (\$6.6 billion) of Turkey's total defense budget, reflecting a strategic imperative to achieve technological self-reliance in unmanned aerial vehicles and guided munitions.

Conversely, the Islamic Republic of Iran's official defense budget declined by 5.6% in real terms to \$7.4 billion in 2025. This contraction was not driven by state-directed demilitarization, but rather by severe structural economic dysfunction. An annual domestic inflation rate exceeding 40% systematically eroded the purchasing power of the Iranian Rial, forcing nominal budget increases to translate into real-term declines.

To bypass these constraints, the Iranian regime relied heavily on off-budget funding mechanisms. SIPRI estimates that approximately 40% of Iran's actual military procurement spending—particularly allocations to the Iran Aircraft Manufacturing Industrial Company (HESA) for drone production, and the Aerospace Industries Organization (AIO) for ballistic missiles—was financed directly using off-budget, state-controlled crude oil export revenues, bypassing parliamentary and central bank oversight.

3. Strategic Energy Geopolitics and Maritime Chokepoints

The intersection of West Asian military volatility and global economic security is fundamentally mediated through the region's energy infrastructure and maritime chokepoints. West Asia holds a unique, commanding position in the global energy matrix. According to the Energy Institute's Statistical Review of World Energy, the region accounts for 48% of the world's proven crude oil reserves, 40% of its proven natural gas reserves, 31% of global crude oil production, and 18% of global natural gas production.

Table No. 1.2: Strategic Energy Geopolitics and Maritime Chokepoints

Metric / Sector	West Asian Volume / Share	Share of Global Total (%)	Strategic Vulnerability / Chokepoint Dependence
Proven Crude Oil Reserves	754 Billion Barrels	48.0%	High concentration in the Persian Gulf basin, vulnerable to kinetic strikes.
Proven Natural Gas Reserves	82.6 Trillion Cubic Meters	40.0%	Concentrated in the North Dome/South Pars field, shared by Qatar and Iran.
Crude Oil Production	28.0 - 30.0	31.0%	Subject to OPEC+

	Million Barrels/Day		production quotas and war-related supply outages.
Natural Gas Production	687 - 690 Billion Cubic Meters/Year	18.0%	Highly dependent on specialized LNG infrastructure (Qatar) and domestic pipelines.
Hormuz Seaborne Oil Exports	15.0 - 20.0 Million Barrels/Day	~20.0%	78% of seaborne crude passing through Hormuz is destined for East Asian markets.
West Asian Primary Energy Mix	36.0 Exajoules (Oil: 43%, Gas: 55%)	98.0% (Regional)	Extreme domestic reliance on hydrocarbons; renewables represent only 0.5% of regional demand.

Source: Compiled from Energy Institute Statistical Review of World Energy / BP Statistical Review and OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2024.

The primary geographic bottleneck for this energy supply is the Strait of Hormuz, a narrow maritime channel separating Iran from Oman. In 2025, approximately 15 million barrels of crude oil per day and roughly 20 million barrels of total petroleum liquids transited the Strait, alongside nearly one-third of the world's liquefied natural gas (LNG) shipments, primarily from Qatar.

Following the initiation of Operation Epic Fury on February 28, 2026, the Strait of Hormuz became the primary arena of asymmetric economic warfare. On March 2, 2026, the IRGC declared a de facto closure of the Strait, threatening to target any merchant vessel transiting the waterway. Tanker traffic through the channel immediately plummeted by approximately 70%, leaving more than 150 large crude carriers and merchant vessels stalled outside the Gulf of Oman. To further deter international shipping, Iran deployed naval mines and utilized sophisticated GPS jamming arrays of uncertain origin, severely complicating commercial navigation.

The economic fallout was immediate. On March 9, 2026, global Brent crude prices spiked to a peak of \$119.50 per barrel as traders priced in a prolonged supply outage. Qatar Energy declared force majeure on several long-term LNG shipments

to Europe, threatening to disrupt European power grids already fragile from the post-Ukraine loss of Russian pipeline gas.

Crucially, the blockade was implemented selectively. While the Strait was completely closed to vessels flagged or owned by the United States and its direct military allies, Iran allowed selective passage for vessels flagged by Turkey, Pakistan, and India. A Saudi Arabian crude tanker carrying cargo specifically destined for Indian refineries was also granted safe passage.

This selective blockade was designed to exploit international divisions, placing intense strategic pressure on Asian industrial economies while attempting to limit global diplomatic consensus for a retaliatory maritime operation.

4. Macro-economic Fallout and Global Economic Projections

The kinetic conflict and the disruption of energy transit routes have triggered severe, systemic shocks across the global economy. According to the World Bank Group's June 11, 2026, Global Economic Prospects report, the West Asian conflict has slowed global GDP growth to its lowest rate since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The bank downgraded its global growth forecasts for two-thirds of all reporting economies, projecting global expansion to slow to 2.5% in 2026, down from 2.9% in 2025.

The World Bank's baseline economic model is constructed around an assumed average Brent crude price of \$94 per barrel for the entirety of 2026, representing a 36% increase over 2025 levels. This baseline assumes that the de facto blockade of the Strait of Hormuz will partially ease by the end of July 2026 due to international diplomatic and naval pressure.

However, the bank warned that if the military conflict escalates further or the maritime blockade persists through the second half of the year, global growth could fall to a severe downside projection of just 1.3% in 2026, while global inflation would rise to 4.4% as Brent prices average \$115 per barrel.

The primary mechanism transmitting this regional crisis to the global economy is supply-chain inflation. In addition to direct petroleum price increases, the closure of the Strait of Hormuz has severely disrupted the export of sulfur and natural gas derivatives used in the production of agricultural inputs. Consequently, average global fertilizer prices are projected to jump by 38% in 2026, driving a subsequent wave of food price inflation that disproportionately impacts low-income, food-deficit developing economies in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia.

Table No. 1.3: Macro-economic Fallout and Global Economic Projections

Economic Indicator	2025 Baseline	2026 Projections (Baseline Scenario)	2026 Projections (Downside Scenario)	Primary Transmission Channels & Impacts

Global Real GDP Growth	2.9%	2.5%	1.3%	Energy supply disruptions, rising sovereign borrowing costs, weak private investment.
Global Headline Inflation	3.3%	4.0%	4.4%	High oil prices, 38% surge in fertilizer prices, rising global food costs.
Developing Economies Growth	4.4%	3.6%	N/A	Post-pandemic low; widening wealth gap with advanced economies (“lost decade”).
MENAP Region GDP Growth	4.0%	1.6%	N/A	Worst-affected region; high destruction of physical capital and infrastructure.
Gulf Economies Growth	4.5%	1.3%	N/A	Close to Zero Severe trade disruption and shutdown of seaborne hydrocarbon export terminals.
Brent Crude Oil Price	\$69.00 - \$83.00/bbl	\$94.00/bbl	\$115.00/bbl	Assumes worst disruptions ease by July 2026. High risk premiums remain.

Source: Compiled from World Bank Group Global Economic Prospects Report / June 11, 2026 Update.

The macroeconomic impact within West Asia is highly stratified. Excluding Iran, overall economic growth in the Middle East, North Africa, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (MENAP) region is forecast to slow to 1.6% in 2026, down from 4.0% in

2025—a downward revision of 2.7 percentage points compared to the bank's January projections.

The wealthy Gulf economies are experiencing the sharpest contraction, with growth falling from 4.5% in 2025 to just 1.3% (or near zero in nations directly exposed to maritime blockades). The United Arab Emirates, for example, is projected to record a GDP growth rate of 2.4% in 2026, a steep decline from the 6.2% recorded in 2025, reflecting the temporary closure of regional transport hubs and the disruption of seaborne shipping routes. Conversely, non-conflict-exposed, energy-importing large economies like India have demonstrated relative resilience, maintaining a growth projection of 6.6% in 2026, though still vulnerable to sustained energy import cost shocks.

5. Great Power Penetration and Multipolar Alignment Dynamics

The United States: Kinetic Hegemony vs. Strategic Retrenchment The role of the United States in the contemporary West Asian security complex is characterized by a deep contradiction: a long-term diplomatic and strategic retrenchment coupled with a massive, high-intensity kinetic re-engagement. For over a decade, successive US administrations pursued a policy of military downsizing in West Asia, prioritizing the “pivot to Asia” to counter Chinese influence in the Indo-Pacific. This retrenchment was driven by a fundamental structural shift in the US domestic energy profile: the shale revolution transformed the United States into a net petroleum exporter in 2020, significantly reducing its direct economic dependency on Persian Gulf oil imports.

However, as the events of February 28, 2026, demonstrated, the United States remains the only external power capable of projecting decisive, high-intensity conventional military force in West Asia. Operation Epic Fury was executed to achieve vital US strategic objectives: preventing an Iranian nuclear breakout, preserving the maritime passage of global commerce, and preventing a systemic vacuum that could be filled by rival great powers.

Yet, this kinetic capacity has not translated into effective diplomatic leadership. The unilateral US decision to launch Operation Epic Fury, coupled with its highly disruptive economic fallout, was met with deep skepticism by traditional allies.

Furthermore, the US-led effort to establish a multinational naval coalition to reopen the Strait of Hormuz was rebuffed by several European and Asian allies who had opposed the initial military campaign, forcing the United States to carry the fiscal and operational burden of the containment campaign largely alone.

China: Vulnerability, Dependency, and Diplomatic Arbitrage

China's geopolitical strategy in West Asia is defined by acute economic vulnerability combined with opportunistic diplomatic arbitrage. Unlike the United States, China is highly dependent on West Asian hydrocarbon imports to sustain its industrial economy. In 2025, approximately 78% of all Middle Eastern crude oil

exports bound for China, Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan passed through the highly volatile Strait of Hormuz, with nearly half of China's total crude imports and one-third of its LNG originating from the Persian Gulf.

To manage this strategic vulnerability, Beijing has pursued a multi-pronged approach:

- **Sourcing Diversification:** China has systematically expanded its energy import pipelines from Russia and Central Asia, while increasing seaborne imports from alternative sanctioned producers, importing roughly 470,000 barrels per day from Venezuela in 2025.
- **Deep Integration with Sanctioned Assets:** Throughout 2025, China purchased more than 80% of Iran's total shipped crude oil, averaging 1.38 million barrels per day. These unofficial, heavily discounted "shadow" oil flows accounted for 13.4% of China's total seaborne imports, establishing a vital economic lifeline for the Iranian state while providing Beijing with cheap industrial inputs.
- **Diplomatic Expansion in the Global South:** China has leveraged its position as a non-interventionist power to build deep economic and diplomatic partnerships across the Global South and Muslim-majority countries. By positioning itself as a neutral mediator—such as brokering the initial Saudi-Iranian normalization agreement in late 2022—China has sought to contrast its diplomatic engagement with the highly militarized unilateralism of the United States.

Following the 2026 strikes, China actively engaged in direct negotiations with the transitional authorities in Tehran, leveraging its economic influence to secure safe-passage guarantees for Chinese-flagged tankers and Qatari LNG carriers, thereby insulating its domestic economy from the worst effects of the maritime blockade.

India: The Balancing Act of Strategic Autonomy

India has navigated the 2024–2026 West Asian crisis by maintaining a strict adherence to strategic autonomy, balancing its vital energy security dependencies against its expanding defense and security partnerships with both regional and global powers. India's economic exposure to West Asia is profound: alongside China, India is the largest consumer of Persian Gulf hydrocarbons, with the two nations receiving 44% of all crude oil exported through the Strait of Hormuz in 2025.

India's diplomatic posture is characterized by dual-track engagement

- **Strategic Security Relations:** New Delhi has maintained robust bilateral defense interactions with regional players, conducting joint naval exercises with Iran in early 2026, just prior to the US-Israeli strikes. These exercises were designed to secure maritime communication lines and demonstrate India's independent security footprint in the western Indian Ocean.

- **Deep Integration with GCC Economies:** Concurrently, India has deepened its economic and technology-driven partnerships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, utilizing the Indian diaspora and bilateral trade frameworks to institutionalize long-term stability.

During the March 2026 blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, India's balanced diplomatic posture yielded significant dividends. Because India had avoided aligning with the unilateral US-led military strikes, Indian-flagged commercial vessels—and select Saudi tankers carrying cargo specifically destined for Indian ports—were granted safe transit by Iranian maritime patrols. This allowed New Delhi to avert the immediate industrial supply disruptions that severely impacted other major Asian economies.

Conclusions

The geopolitical landscape of West Asia has undergone a structural transformation between 2023 and mid-2026, transitioning from a standard regional security complex defined by state-managed proxy competition to a highly fragmented, multi-polar conflict formation. The rapid degradation of Iran's Axis of Resistance, the collapse of the Syrian Assad regime, and the subsequent decapitation of the Iranian state leadership during Operation Epic Fury have shattered the regional deterrence paradigms that had structured regional security for nearly half a century.

The empirical evidence compiled in this report demonstrates that this geopolitical transition has generated profound economic and strategic feedback loops. The de facto blockade of the Strait of Hormuz in March 2026 has exposed the structural vulnerability of the global economy to localized West Asian security shocks, triggering an energy price spike and a sharp deceleration in global economic growth to 2.5%.

Ultimately, the findings suggest that military dominance alone is insufficient to secure long-term structural stability. While the United States and Israel possess the kinetic capability to execute devastating strikes and achieve functional state decapitation, they remain structurally limited in their capacity to reconstruct stable governance models or foster regional diplomatic consensus.

Consequently, West Asia enters the second half of 2026 in a state of exhausted realignment, where the decline of traditional state authority has left a highly volatile, fragmented security environment vulnerable to prolonged asymmetric warfare and intense great-power competition.

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