

Clandestine Axis of Middle East Hegemony: Iran, Israel, and the US.





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In George Orwell's classic *1984*, his world was held together by unending war: In the book, messages of hate and reasons to fear were broadcast each day to encourage fearful, slavish masses to rail against an imaginary enemy rather than their actual masters.

US and British geo-strategists have historically been masters of manipulation, redrawing the map of the world to suit Western economic, geopolitical, and military interests, particularly in the MENA region. Their detractors are convinced that their broad goal is Western domination of the area via surrogates and partners such as Israel and Iran (via the back door) to retain control over natural resources and waterways while ensuring those resources do not fall into the hands of competitors such as China and Russia. A school of thought contends that they manufacture sectarian conflicts on the principle of "divide and rule," creating tensions that justify the installation of military bases and fuel the military-industrial complex through arms sales.

A 2008 paper titled *America's Divide and Rule Strategies in the Middle East* by Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya highlights US efforts to create divisions within Middle Eastern and Central Asian populations through ethno-cultural, religious, sectarian, national, and political differences. According to this perspective, sectarian divides—particularly between Sunni and Shia Muslims—have been deliberately cultivated to weaken regional unity and facilitate geopolitical control.

The Iraq War (2003) and its aftermath further exacerbated these sectarian tensions. The dismantling of Saddam Hussein's Sunni-dominated Ba'athist regime and the empowerment of Shia and Kurdish groups created a power vacuum, fueling sectarian violence. Groups like Al-Qaeda in Iraq (later ISIS) thrived under these conditions, exploiting sectarian grievances. The redrawing of Iraq's internal boundaries, particularly the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government, further solidified ethnic divisions. Toby Dodge, in *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a Road to Peace*, argues that the US approach to state-building in Iraq inadvertently deepened these fault lines.

Similarly, US involvement in the Syrian Civil War (2011–2024), through support for various opposition groups, contributed to the country's fragmentation along ethnic and sectarian lines. The conflict saw the rise of numerous factions, many of which received US backing. The emergence and territorial control of Kurdish-dominated forces in northeastern Syria, supported by the US in the fight against ISIS, created tensions with Arab populations and neighboring Turkey. The conflict has been widely analyzed as having a significant sectarian dimension, with regional powers backing different factions along Sunni-Shia lines.

Middle East expert and author Fred Reed states: "One might be forgiven for surmising that the current thrust of US policy in the Middle East and through the Muslim world is to exacerbate Sunni-Shiite divisions."

US foreign policy in the region has often been perceived as favoring certain regional powers over others, sometimes along sectarian lines, exacerbating existing tensions. The complex relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia (a Sunni-majority state) and its rivalry with Iran (a Shia-majority state) has frequently been interpreted through this lens, even if US interests are primarily geopolitical. Support for different factions in conflicts like the Yemeni Civil War has similarly been framed within the context of regional sectarian rivalries.

Certain think tanks and policy circles in the US have promoted ideas that emphasize sectarian and ethnic divisions in the Middle East as a way to understand and potentially manage the region. Foreign Policy in Focus columnist Conn Hallinan argues that a major US concern in the Middle East is oil. With two-thirds of US oil expected to be imported by 2020, and 65% of the world's remaining oil reserves located in the Middle East, he suggests that a strategy of "divide and conquer" is aimed at keeping strategic control of these resources. Hallinan also highlights the lucrative nature of ongoing Middle Eastern tensions for the US arms industry, citing that countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Oman have spent over \$150 billion on arms purchases.

While the significance of oil in US foreign policy has arguably shifted due to increased domestic production and diversification of energy sources, the Middle East remains strategically important for global energy security. A 2024 report from the Council for a Secure America notes that US oil imports from the Middle East have reached a record low, falling below 11% of total imports. However, this shift does not negate the region's role in global energy markets.

The US continues to maintain strong relationships with key Gulf oil-producing states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While policy priorities have expanded beyond securing oil supplies to include counterterrorism, regional stability, and containing rival powers, access to stable energy markets remains a key consideration. Events like the war in Ukraine have further underscored the interconnectedness of global energy markets and the importance of stable Middle Eastern oil production in preventing global price shocks. In fiscal year 2024, US military sales surged, with direct commercial sales rising to \$200.8 billion from \$157.5 billion in 2023. Government-facilitated arms sales also increased to \$117.9 billion. The Middle East remains a significant market for US arms exports, with over \$5.5 billion in approved arms sales to Egypt and Morocco alone in December 2024.

The underlying argument of this paper is that beyond the apparent hostilities and rivalries in the region, there exists a covert strategic alliance between Iran, Israel, and the United States. This cooperation manifests in various ways, including indirect coordination in conflict zones, intelligence-sharing, and economic transactions that defy public rhetoric. Despite Iran's portrayal as a staunch adversary of both the US and Israel, instances of tacit collaboration—such as Iranian oil exports finding their way to markets through indirect channels, US tolerance of Iranian-backed militias in specific contexts, and shared interests in counterbalancing regional actors like Turkey and the Gulf states—suggest a more complex dynamic. This hidden alliance reflects a pragmatic approach to maintaining regional equilibrium, securing strategic interests, and preventing the emergence of truly independent powers that could challenge the existing order.

Historical Context

The United States has long been accused of playing a double game in the Middle East, supporting conflicting sides in various conflicts to maintain control over the region. Saddam Hussein was initially backed by Washington and given support during Iraq's invasion of Iran in 1980, with the US supplying weapons to Iraq while also arming Iran through its Israeli ally. This duplicity extended to the lead-up of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, when Saddam reportedly believed he had received implicit approval from the US, as indicated by a conversation with Ambassador April Glaspie. The Gulf War that followed, along with a decade of sanctions, resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, including 500,000 children, a cost that former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright famously deemed "worth it." The destabilization of Iraq benefited Israel by cutting off financial support for the Palestinians and strengthened Iran, which was expanding its influence through Shiite proxies across the region.

The broader Middle East had already been in turmoil since the 1980s, with Western intervention fuelling conflicts that shattered the region's economic progress. The Iran-Iraq War raged for eight years, Israel invaded Lebanon in 1982, leading to the creation of Hezbollah with Syrian backing, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan gave rise to the Arab-Afghan movement that later evolved into Al Qaeda. This chaos aligned with longstanding Western strategies of weakening and dividing the region to maintain control. The Israeli perspective on these developments can be traced to Oded Yinon's 1982 paper, published in the World Zionist Organisation's Kivunim journal, which laid out a vision for reshaping the Middle East by exploiting ethnic and sectarian divisions to fragment Arab states into weaker entities. Yinon argued that the Arab world was an artificial construct imposed by foreign powers and predicted that every Muslim Arab state would face internal collapse due to its inherent divisions.

His strategy envisioned Israel regaining control over the Sinai Peninsula, which had been obstructed by the Camp David Accords, and proposed that Israel should pursue indirect means to achieve this goal by fostering instability in Egypt. He foresaw the eventual fragmentation of Egypt into smaller states, including a Christian Coptic state in Upper Egypt, a scenario that was delayed by the peace treaty but remained an inevitable outcome in his view. Iraq was seen as an even more crucial target for dissolution than Syria due to its oil wealth and internal vulnerabilities, with the Iran-Iraq War serving as a means to weaken Iraq from within before it could pose a serious challenge to Israel. The disintegration of Lebanon was viewed as a model for the entire Arab world, with Syria also expected to fracture along sectarian lines into separate Alawite, Sunni, and Druze entities. The Arabian Peninsula, particularly Saudi Arabia, was described as another natural candidate for collapse due to internal and external pressures. Yinon's strategy also involved the destruction of Jordan in its existing form, transferring power to its Palestinian majority as part of a broader effort to reshape the region in Israel's favour. Notably, Yinon's paper, written after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, made no mention of Iran as a threat, suggesting that at the time, Israel's main focus was the fragmentation of Sunni-majority states rather than Iran. Historical evidence also challenges the perception of Iran and the US as sworn enemies, as seen in operations like "Tipped Kettle," a scheme in which Israel transferred weapons captured from the PLO in Lebanon to Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, facilitated by the CIA and the Pentagon. In another example, Iran reportedly assisted Israel in its 1981 bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, reinforcing the argument that geopolitical rivalries in the Middle East are often shaped by backdoor deals and strategic alliances that contradict official narratives.

The West and Utilization of Islam

The study “The Globalists and the Islamists: Fomenting the Clash of Civilizations for a New World Order” argues that the war on terror was not about promoting freedom and democracy but rather a strategic move to consolidate American global dominance. It traces this back to the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which divided the Ottoman Empire into Western-controlled territories, forming the modern Middle East’s borders. The agreement allowed Britain to dominate oil-rich areas such as Iraq and Kuwait while securing Palestine and Jordan, while France took control of Syria and Lebanon. After the 1967 war, the decline of secular nationalism in the Arab world enabled Islamist movements to gain political traction. However, following the 1973 October War, Arab regimes consolidated power, benefiting from a surge in oil prices that enriched their governments and curtailed Islamist opposition. William Engdahl’s book “A Century of War” suggests that this oil price surge was premeditated by the Anglo-American elite at a 1973 Bilderberg conference in Sweden, allegedly orchestrated to make Britain’s North Sea oil projects viable and increase Third World nations’ dependence on Western financial institutions. This led to long-term economic entrapment through heavy borrowing to afford energy costs.

The “War on Terror” led to a significant expansion of US military bases, operations, and influence across the Middle East, Central Asia, and Africa. This expansion can be interpreted as a move to solidify American power projection capabilities. The establishment and maintenance of military bases in countries like Afghanistan, Iraq (for a prolonged period), Qatar, Bahrain, and others. Increased military spending and the development of new military technologies justified by the need to combat terrorism. The use of drone warfare and special operations forces in various countries, often without explicit consent or international oversight. Scholars like Chalmers Johnson in his “Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire” trilogy argue that the expansion of the American empire through military bases has been a key driver of US foreign policy.

The rise of Islamist movements, despite Western-backed regimes’ financial gains, continued to challenge Arab rulers. The study points to key assassinations, such as King Faisal’s death, allegedly tied to his execution of an Islamic militant, and President Anwar Sadat’s assassination by the Islamic Jihad, an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. The violent 1982 confrontation between Syria’s Baathist regime and the Muslim Brotherhood in Hama, which resulted in 20,000 deaths, underscores the persistent conflict between secular governments and Islamist factions. The study asserts that Western powers, particularly Britain, manipulated Islam to serve their strategic goals, a policy later adopted by the United States after the British Empire’s decline. Said Aburish’s book “A Brutal Friendship – the West and the Arab Elite” describes three phases of Islam’s relationship with Western powers throughout the 20th century. The first phase, post-World War I, saw Arab leaders aligning with Britain for legitimacy, relying on Islam to maintain authority over the masses. The second phase in the 1950s marked the West’s opposition to secular Arab nationalism, particularly movements advocating for Arab unity, which were seen as threats to Western influence and client states’ survival. During this period, the CIA actively sought an Islamic figure comparable to American evangelist Billy Graham to counter Nasser’s pan-Arabist ideology, eventually forging ties with the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood had been a longstanding British intelligence asset, particularly against Nasser, who outlawed the group in 1954 after an assassination attempt on his life. In 1955, MI6 leveraged the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria to destabilize a pro-Egyptian government. Following Nasser's nationalization of the Suez Canal, British intelligence expanded its collaboration with the Brotherhood. When Nasser retaliated by cracking down on British agents in Egypt, the Arab News Agency was raided, and multiple operatives were arrested. Documents revealed that British intelligence had been attempting to incite fundamentalist uprisings as a pretext for military intervention. The study further describes the third phase, as detailed in Aburish's work, as a period where Western powers actively supported militant Islamist groups to overthrow anti-Western governments, such as Mossadegh in Iran and Nasser in Egypt. The West aligned with Islamist factions, assuming their conservative stance would prevent them from turning against their sponsors. Throughout this historical arc, the study suggests that Islamist movements were not simply grassroots religious revivals but were often shaped and manipulated by global powers to serve broader geopolitical objectives.

*former CIA operative Miles Copeland, in his autobiography *The Game Player*, claimed that the CIA became interested in Gamal Abdel Nasser as part of a project to find a "Muslim Billy Graham" to counter anti-American sentiment in the Middle East. Copeland also suggested a degree of initial support for Nasser before relations soured. It's important to note that Copeland's accounts, while often cited, are sometimes viewed with skepticism due to their anecdotal nature and potential for exaggeration.*

*The "Mosque in Munich" Narrative: Ian Johnson's Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *A Mosque in Munich: Nazis, the CIA and the Muslim Brotherhood in the West*, explores the early connections between Western intelligence agencies (including the CIA) and the Muslim Brotherhood during the Cold War. The book argues that the CIA, along with former Nazis, played a role in nurturing political Islam as a counterforce to Soviet influence and secular Arab nationalism. During the 1950s, the US was actively seeking allies in the Middle East to contain the spread of communism and Soviet influence. Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabist and non-aligned policies were viewed with suspicion by the US, particularly after the Suez Crisis in 1956. This context suggests a potential motive for the US to explore alliances with groups that opposed Nasser, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Some historical accounts and declassified documents (though often debated in their interpretation) suggest that there were early contacts and perhaps even some level of indirect support between the US and the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly after 2011.*

U.S./UK and Iran

Installing the Shah

Prior to Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, the United States and Israel benefited from close cooperation with Iran to maintain hegemony over the strategically important, oil-rich Middle East and to use Iran as a buffer against Soviet Communism. This alliance was solidified through the installation of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who replaced Iran's elected leader, Dr. Mohammed Mossadeq, in a CIA-orchestrated coup known as "Operation Ajax." Mossadeq's efforts to nationalize Iran's oil industry had alarmed the West, prompting the United States to fund the Ayatollahs, including Tayyeb Hsaj-Reza'i, to stir unrest against him—ironically, contributing to the later rise of Ayatollah Khomeini.

Under the Shah's rule, Iran pursued extensive modernization, including ambitious nuclear development, with significant backing from the US and Europe. The Bushehr nuclear power plant, initiated with German assistance in the 1970s and later completed with Russian support, is a testament to these early collaborations. The technical expertise and infrastructure established during this period provided Iran with the foundation for its current nuclear program. Think tank analyses and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports frequently highlight this historical context when assessing Iran's nuclear capabilities today. Despite the revolution and subsequent sanctions, Iran has since developed significant indigenous capabilities, designing and operating its own centrifuges and expanding its enrichment facilities. Recent IAEA reports indicate that Iran has significantly increased its stockpile of enriched uranium, at times reaching levels closer to weapons-grade than permitted under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The agency has also raised concerns over Iran's restricted access to nuclear sites and the completeness of its declarations. These reports, cited by governments and intelligence agencies, continue to shape international policy decisions regarding Iran.

The Shah's interest in nuclear weapons remains a key factor in discussions about Iran's nuclear intentions. In 1974, when asked by a French journalist whether Iran would one day possess nuclear weapons, the Shah confidently replied, "Without any doubt, and sooner than one would think." His attempts to purchase nuclear submarines from France in 1975 alarmed the US, with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and the Ford administration fearing that their regional ally was becoming increasingly difficult to control. The United States' approach to Iran's nuclear program has fluctuated over the decades, from engagement and diplomatic agreements to sanctions and confrontational policies. The US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 under the Trump administration, followed by Iran's escalated enrichment activities, underscores the persistence of tensions. The Biden administration has attempted to revive the deal, reflecting the continued Western concern over Iran's potential nuclear weapons capability.

With Washington's backing, the Shah proclaimed himself the "Guardian of the Arabian Gulf" in 1961 and became the first regional leader to recognize the State of Israel. Under pressure from the US, British Petroleum (formerly Anglo-Iranian Oil Company) relinquished its monopoly over Iran's oil, leading to the creation of a consortium in 1954 that included BP, Gulf Oil, Royal Dutch Shell, Total S.A., and Aramco's American partners. However, as Iran's economic and military power grew, so did the Shah's ambitions and authoritarian tendencies. Known for his extravagance, he remained a valuable ally to the US as long as he aligned with its broader strategic goals. His expansionist policies, however, demonstrated his growing regional assertiveness—most notably, his seizure of the UAE-owned islands of Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb in 1971. Neither the US nor the UK intervened, prioritizing their relationship with a powerful, oil-rich Iran over their ties with the small Gulf states, which at the time held little geopolitical influence.

Iran's nuclear program itself was initially established through the US-led Atoms for Peace initiative, with Western European governments also playing a role in its development. However, by the 1970s, the Shah's growing interest in nuclear weapons diverged from the West's expectations. His aspirations for nuclear-armed submarines and his overt statements about acquiring nuclear weapons troubled the Ford administration, which began to fear that their regional puppet was slipping out of control. Today,

the legacy of these early nuclear ambitions continues to influence global perceptions of Iran's nuclear program. The US and its allies cite the Shah's historical pursuit of nuclear weapons as a cautionary precedent, reinforcing their concerns about Iran's current enrichment levels and its lack of full transparency with the IAEA. While Iran insists that its program remains for peaceful energy purposes, the shadow of its past nuclear ambitions—and the technological expertise cultivated during the Shah's era—keeps the question of Iran's true nuclear intentions at the center of international diplomacy.

In the meantime, the Shah faced growing hostility from the nation's poor and oppressed. Leading the charge was Ayatollah Khomeini, who, according to British journalist Stanton Hope, author of "Arabian Adventurer: The Story of Haji Williamson," was not Iranian. This biography of William Richard Williamson, a British policeman who worked in South Yemen, states that Williamson embraced Islam and married at least seven wives of Arab and Indian descent. Reportedly, one of his sons took the name Khomeini. More about Khomeini's alleged parentage can be found in sources discussing this claim.

Supporting this thesis, Melik Kaylan wrote an article titled "Was Khomeini's Father a Brit?" on Forbes. Kaylan asks, "What of Khomeini's legitimacy?" and claims that three years ago, some astonishing documents came into his possession regarding this point. He states that the material was handed to him by the head of the alumni society of his old college, Clifton College. The envelope contained two documents: a Xeroxed book review from the long-defunct Illustrated London News, dated November 10, 1951, titled "Arabian Adventurer: The Story of Haji Williamson," and a May 3, 2006, Xerox of an article entitled "Who Was the Ayatollah Khomeini?" from a publication called Persian Journal.

Kaylan explains that the book review details the adventure-filled life of Victorian Englishman William Richard Williamson, born in 1872. Williamson attended Clifton's preparatory school but found its discipline intolerable, prompting him to run away to sea as a young teenager. He sailed on British merchant ships, later roaming the U.S. as a cowboy, miner, and actor before wandering across the world taking odd jobs from the Philippines to the Arabian Gulf. In the 1880s, Williamson settled in Arabia, fully embraced local customs, converted to Islam, married two wives in the Islamic way, and had thirteen children. The Persian Journal article by Alan Peters maintains that Khomeini was one of Williamson's sons.

Few contest that Khomeini's mother was an Indian from Kashmir, but little is known about his paternal origins among Iranians. The late Iranian Senator Moussavi, who represented Khuzestan Province (Al Ahwaz) during the time of the Shah, reportedly knew Khomeini's father and his four sons well. Moussavi helped them obtain Iranian identity cards with fictitious dates and places of birth to avoid military service. He was later killed on Khomeini's personal orders immediately after Khomeini's return to Iran from exile in France.

Mohammed Reza Pahlavi once asserted, "If you lift up Khomeini's beard, you will find MADE IN ENGLAND written under his chin." This quote is cited in Daniel Pipes' book "The Hidden Hand: Middle East Fears of Conspiracy." BBC Persian journalist Hossein Shahidi has also mentioned "the deep-rooted belief" among Iranians that Britain is behind every move in Iran, specifically crediting or accusing the BBC of playing a role in the downfall of both Pahlavi kings, Reza Shah and his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, as discussed in Shahidi's book "BBC Persian Service: 60 Years On."

In 1964, Khomeini was sentenced to death for plotting against the Shah, but the British ambassador to Iran intervened by urging the respected Ayatollah Shariatmadari to award Khomeini the fake title of Ayatollah, as it was forbidden to execute an Ayatollah. This claim appears in Michael M. J. Fischer's book "Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution." There is also evidence suggesting that the CIA and MI6 plotted to remove the Shah once he ceased to follow their orders. Radio Free Iran disclosed that while Khomeini was studying in Qom, he received a monthly stipend from the British and remained in constant contact with British officials, a claim referenced in Ervand Abrahamian's book "Khomeinism."

Khomeini was eventually forced out of Iran and moved to Iraq. In 1978, Saddam Hussein's government deported him, leading to his exile in France, where he continued his Islamic studies. In France, he was treated as a prominent figure, gaining widespread attention as a symbol of opposition to the Shah. Once Khomeini settled at Château de Neauphle-le-Château, he received numerous visitors, including reporters from the BBC, as well as contacts allegedly linked to the CIA and MI6.

The BBC played a significant role in amplifying Khomeini's voice, and its Persian service became known in Iran as "the Ayatollah BBC" for its extensive coverage of Khomeini's message. The BBC detailed reports on SAVAK's torture techniques and helped distribute Khomeini's propaganda tapes to Iranian clerics. It also played a role in persuading Iranian students that Shiite Islam offered the path to Iran's salvation.

A 1973 issue of *The Economist* magazine featured Iran under the title "Iran: The Next Japan of the Middle East," highlighting the nation's booming economy, which was growing at an annual rate of 7-8 percent. The article promoted Iran as a model for developing nations. However, the U.S. establishment reportedly disapproved, as its global strategy favored population control and economic dependency in the Third World. This led to efforts to undermine Iran's power, with the Shah being the primary target. The attack on the Shah's government was facilitated through the Muslim Brotherhood and Iran's mullahs and ayatollahs, with British intelligence allegedly playing a key role.

Dr. John Coleman, a former British intelligence officer and author of multiple books on global power structures, argues that the Muslim Brotherhood was created by figures such as T. E. Lawrence, E. G. Browne, Arnold Toynbee, St. John Philby, and Bertrand Russell. He claims their mission was to keep the Middle East underdeveloped so that its natural resources, particularly oil, could continue to be exploited by Western powers.

On January 16, 1979, as public opposition mounted, the Shah fled Iran into exile, believing he would be able to return. Although he was ill, the U.S. and Britain denied him refuge, leaving only Egypt's President Anwar el-Sadat to welcome him in his final days. The Shah later wrote in his memoir, "I did not know it then, perhaps I did not want to know—but it is clear to me now, the Americans wanted me out."

In his book "The Last Shah of Iran," former Iranian minister Houchang Nahavandi recounts that the Shah had been warned by the head of French intelligence that certain U.S. government officials wanted him removed. The Shah dismissed the warning, saying, "It would be stupid to replace me... I am the best defender of the West."

On February 1, 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini was flown back to Iran, allegedly with MI6's assistance, to establish a theocratic regime. Dr. Coleman writes that Iranians at the time joked about the mullahs being stamped "Made in Britain." In its 1980 broadcasts, Radio Free Iran categorized the Shah's enemies as including Iranian politicians linked to Israeli intelligence, the CIA's network of agents, feudal landowners, Freemasons, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

US - Iran Relations Post 1991 Gulf War

After the 1991 Gulf War, U.S.-Iranian rapprochement was indeed considered by successive American administrations, beginning with President George H.W. Bush. Following Saddam Hussein's defeat, Bush sought to improve relations with Iran, but Tehran responded ambivalently due to the prevailing domestic sentiment after Ayatollah Khomeini's death. The Iranian public, having been indoctrinated against the West, was not prepared to accept better relations with the "Great Satan." Nevertheless, Iranian President Hashemi Rafsanjani made attempts to explore détente, signalling goodwill by ordering Hezbollah to release the remaining hostages in Lebanon and expanding back-channel communications through the Swiss. He also allowed his vice-president to publish an op-ed in *Ettela'at* advocating negotiations with Washington. Rafsanjani reached out to European powers, including the UK, in an effort to attract trade and investment, hoping this would also acclimate Iranians to the idea of normalizing relations with the West. However, the broader regional Islamist resurgence and Iran's role as a model for such movements hindered his efforts.

During Bill Clinton's presidency, there was an interest in improving ties with Iran. His administration decided against tilting towards Iraq, and National Security Council Director Martin Indyk clarified that U.S. concerns were not about Iran's political system but its behaviour. This represented a softer approach compared to Washington's hostility towards Iraq. However, hardline Republicans in Congress introduced legislation banning all U.S. trade with Iran, undermining Rafsanjani's ability to push for a more moderate policy. By 1997, Iranian public sentiment had shifted, with many, especially the youth and women, growing disillusioned with the regime and looking favourably upon the United States. Nostalgia for the Shah's era grew, fuelled by the appeal of Western freedoms, material wealth, and pop culture. When reformist Mohammad Khatami won 69% of the vote, he filled his cabinet with liberals and signalled willingness to engage with the U.S., provided Washington changed its approach.

Khatami took significant steps towards détente, including a 1998 CNN interview with Christiane Amanpour in which he expressed a positive outlook on U.S.-Iran relations. He also differentiated between the Israeli government and the Israeli people, signalling a softer stance. Iran sent unofficial envoys to Washington to gauge American willingness to engage and conveyed a readiness to shut down terrorist operations and address concerns over its nuclear program. As a gesture of goodwill, Iran cracked down on Iraqi oil smuggling, cutting off a revenue stream for Saddam Hussein. In response, Clinton sought input from Congress and allies regarding a diplomatic opening. The U.S. relaxed visa requirements for Iranians, and a wrestling team was sent to compete in Iran in a move likened to "ping-pong diplomacy."

Clinton Administration (**1993-2001**): While maintaining sanctions, the Clinton administration explored some cautious engagement with Iran, particularly after the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997, who advocated for a “dialogue of civilizations.” There were limited areas of cooperation, but fundamental differences and mutual distrust persisted.

George W. Bush Administration (**2001-2009**): Initially, there were some signals of potential cooperation, particularly after the 9/11 attacks when Iran offered condolences. However, President Bush’s inclusion of Iran in the “**Axis of Evil**” in 2002 dramatically escalated tensions. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003, while removing a common enemy in Saddam Hussein, also led to a situation where both the US and Iran had significant influence, often on opposing sides. Concerns about Iran’s nuclear program intensified during this period.

Obama Administration (**2009-2017**): President Obama pursued a dual-track approach of engagement and pressure. This ultimately led to the landmark Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, a nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 (the US, UK, France, China, Russia, and Germany). Under the JCPOA, Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of some international sanctions. This period represented the most significant progress towards détente in decades. However, deep-seated mistrust and regional tensions remained.

Trump Administration (**2017-2021**): President Trump withdrew the US from the JCPOA in May 2018, reimposing and intensifying sanctions on Iran as part of a “maximum pressure” campaign. This move significantly reversed the progress made under Obama and led to a sharp deterioration in relations. Iran responded by gradually reducing its compliance with the JCPOA. Tensions escalated further with incidents like the killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani by a US drone strike in 2020.

Biden Administration (**2021-2025**): President Biden has stated his intention to rejoin the JCPOA, but efforts to do so have stalled. While there have been indirect talks, a full return to the agreement has not materialized. Tensions remain high due to ongoing concerns about Iran’s nuclear program, its ballistic missile development, and its role in regional conflicts. The conflict in Gaza following the October 7th attacks has further complicated the situation, with increased regional tensions involving Iran-backed proxies and the US military presence. As of March 2025, the relationship remains deeply strained, with no clear path towards détente in the immediate future.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright extended an invitation for Iran to work towards normalization, and in 1998, the U.S. removed Iran from its list of states involved in narcotics trafficking. Clinton further sought to mend ties by acknowledging past Western interference in Iranian affairs and expressing hopes for a “common future.” In April 1999, the U.S. eased sanctions on Iranian food and medicine imports. Khatami, meanwhile, initially loosened restrictions on censorship, dress codes, and cultural expression, fostering a more open atmosphere. However, his reforms were met with resistance from hardline vigilantes and conservative clerics who issued fatwas justifying attacks on reformists. As unrest mounted, the Revolutionary Guard warned Khatami to restrain his actions, leading him to denounce protestors and roll back his reforms.

Despite these setbacks, Clinton remained committed to engagement. Albright apologized for past U.S. policies, lifted a ban on Iranian food imports, and called for official dialogue. In 2000, Khatami

spoke at the UN General Assembly while Clinton remained in attendance, an unprecedented move for an American president. However, Khatami, facing internal political pressures, refrained from a public handshake with Clinton, missing a key moment for potential rapprochement.

When George W. Bush assumed office, American oil companies lobbied to lift sanctions on Iran, with Dick Cheney, then Halliburton chairman, calling them “self-defeating.” Secretary of State Colin Powell emphasized that Iranians were not considered enemies, highlighting U.S. efforts to engage them diplomatically. However, deep divisions emerged within the Bush administration over Iran, with neoconservatives in the Pentagon and Vice President’s office prioritizing regime change in Iraq over diplomatic engagement with Tehran.

After the 9/11 attacks, despite Iran being labeled the “most active state sponsor of terrorism,” it became evident that Tehran would not be a target in the War on Terror. In fact, there were early signs of cooperation. According to Kenneth Pollack in *The Persian Puzzle*, and as later supported by Gareth Porter’s reporting, Iran and the U.S. were on a path towards collaboration against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in late 2001 and early 2002. However, this potential partnership was undermined when Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld intervened to block further cooperation.

Despite some initial openness within the early George W. Bush White House towards potentially improving relations with Iran, the influence of neoconservative elements led to a more confrontational policy, particularly following the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Concerns over Iran’s escalating nuclear program became the central focus, leading to increased international sanctions and a period of significant tension with no real progress towards détente. This hardline approach was notably different from the subsequent Obama administration’s strategy, which combined pressure with diplomatic engagement, culminating in the JCPOA nuclear agreement in 2015. However, this progress was reversed under the Trump administration, which withdrew from the JCPOA and reimposed a “maximum pressure” campaign through intensified sanctions. The current Biden administration has expressed a desire to return to the JCPOA, but efforts have faced significant challenges, and the relationship remains strained amidst ongoing concerns about Iran’s nuclear activities and regional role. Thus, the initial debates within the Bush White House foreshadowed a period of prolonged tension that has continued to shape the complex and often adversarial relationship between the United States and Iran in the years since.

Cooperation in Afghanistan

To the surprise of the American public, Iran reacted to the 9/11 attacks with unexpected sympathy. More than any other country in the region, the Iranians condemned the tragedy, and candlelight vigils were held in Tehran for the victims. The Iranian government strongly encouraged the U.S. to invade Afghanistan and even offered assistance. According to Kenneth Pollack, the U.S. and Iran cooperated through a subgroup that operated in Geneva. European members of this secret committee found their Iranian counterparts to be professional, thoughtful, and highly knowledgeable about Afghanistan and the Taliban.

Tehran extended multiple forms of support to the U.S.-led effort. It offered to allow American aircraft to use airfields in eastern Iran and agreed to conduct search and rescue missions for downed American pilots who had to bail out over Iranian territory. Iran also permitted an American freighter to offload its cargo at an Iranian port, the fastest route into southwestern Afghanistan. Additionally, it played a key role in persuading the Northern Alliance to join the U.S.-led mission and cooperate with Pashtun groups to ensure that the war against the Taliban had broad Afghan support.

By late November 2001, with the Taliban retreating, a UN conference in Germany convened to establish an interim Afghan government. Behind the scenes, Iran and the U.S. worked together to ensure the conference's success. However, in public, Iranian leaders maintained their anti-American rhetoric. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei criticized the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, framing it as part of Washington's broader ambition for regional domination.

Iran's engagement in Afghanistan extended beyond military and intelligence cooperation. Tehran supported Afghanistan's Shiite minority groups, particularly the Tajiks and Hazaras, and integrated the city of Herat into its electricity grid. It also invested in infrastructure, partnering with India to fund highway projects and working with NATO members to construct an Iran-Afghanistan railway.

Despite its hostility toward the Taliban, reports later surfaced suggesting that Iran had secretly provided arms to the group. Afghan officials reported arms smuggling from Iran to the Taliban, and Wikileaks documents revealed direct contact between Iranian officials and both the Taliban and Al-Qaeda's senior leadership.

Pollack's assertions are supported by an analysis from the Middle East Policy Council, which confirms that while countries like Russia and Pakistan initially opposed a U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, Iran backed the plan. The Geneva Contact Group—composed of U.S. and Iranian officials—worked on strategies to topple the Taliban, with Iran providing intelligence, arresting Al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters who had crossed into its borders, and deporting them.

Cooperation in the US-led Invasion of Iraq

Iranian officials involved in the Geneva Group sought to expand discussions with their American counterparts beyond Afghanistan, particularly regarding Iraq. According to Kenneth Pollack, a meeting between U.S. and Iranian representatives took place in January 2002, marking a breakthrough as the Bush administration achieved what the Clinton administration could not—engaging in direct talks with Iranian officials. Once again, Iran hinted at its willingness to restore normal relations with the U.S. Stephen J. Hadley, National Security Advisor during George W. Bush's second term, later described how U.S. and Iranian envoys cooperated at the Bonn Conference in December 2002 to establish the first post-Taliban government in Afghanistan. The Iranian delegation played a pivotal role in convincing Afghan opposition groups to support Hamid Karzai, the U.S.-backed candidate for president.

After the 2003 ouster of Saddam Hussein, Tehran and Washington sought to cooperate in stabilizing Iraq amid increasing terrorist and insurgent violence. In 2004, U.S. and Iranian envoys held three meetings in Baghdad, two at the ambassadorial level. Within the U.S. administration, some, including

Richard Haass, Director of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, argued for ending opposition to Iran's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, internal divisions prevented such proposals from advancing. Despite this diplomatic engagement, tensions persisted.

In his 2002 State of the Union Address, President George W. Bush labeled Iran, Iraq, and North Korea as an "Axis of Evil," a phrase later admitted by administration officials to be more of a rhetorical device than a strategic policy decision. Some officials even objected to Iran's inclusion, arguing that it should not have been grouped with Saddam Hussein's Iraq or Kim Jong-Il's North Korea. Meanwhile, U.S. exports to Iran expanded significantly under Bush's presidency, despite his administration's public stance against Tehran's nuclear ambitions and alleged sponsorship of terrorism. Conservative commentator Debbie Schlusel highlighted that American exports to Iran grew more than tenfold during this period, with notable shipments including \$158 million worth of cigarettes, alongside fur clothing, sculptures, perfume, musical instruments, and military apparel.

Even as anti-Iranian rhetoric intensified, Iran returned to the Geneva talks, seeing them as an opportunity to better understand America's plans for Iraq. These discussions reinforced Tehran's belief that the U.S. was determined to topple Saddam Hussein, leading Iranian leaders to conclude that Iraq's Shiite majority would gain significant political power. During the U.S.-led invasion, Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and its allied militias were instructed not to obstruct coalition forces. After the invasion, Iran actively participated in Iraq's reconstruction, recognizing the war as beneficial to its strategic interests and working to prevent Iraq from descending into chaos. By early 2004, Iran's intelligence and covert organizations—including the Revolutionary Guards' Qods Force, Hezbollah, the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security (MOIS), and Lebanese Hezbollah—were fully operational in Iraq. Despite having multiple opportunities to attack American and coalition forces, Iran largely refrained from doing so.

Over time, Iraq came under the influence of a pro-Iranian administration, with many key figures having lived in Iran or maintaining close ties with Tehran. Under Nouri al-Maliki's leadership, Iraq aligned with Iran on numerous international issues, including support for Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria. Iraq remains one of the few Arab nations that have diplomatically sided with Iran on the Syrian conflict. Lebanese journalist Hazem Al-Amin argued that Iraq has effectively become an extension of Iran's regional influence, stating that developments in Iraq could no longer be seen as purely "Iraqi" since the country had become integrated into Iran's broader regional strategy. He further noted that Maliki relied on Iran to counter his rivals, whether Sunni, Shiite, or Kurdish, and that Iran played a crucial role in securing a Shiite majority for Maliki's government, restraining Muqtada al-Sadr's opposition, and pressuring Kurdish factions into compliance.

John Kampfner, writing for *The Daily Telegraph*, summarized Iran's gains from the Iraq War, arguing that "the real winner has been Iran." He quoted a former UN official who remarked that if Iranian leaders were to kneel in prayer, they should be offering gratitude to the Bush administration. The geopolitical landscape of the region had shifted dramatically, with Iran emerging as a dominant force in post-Saddam Iraq.

Beyond simply convincing the Afghan opposition to support Hamid Karzai, Iran played a significant role in the broader negotiations at the Bonn Conference. Reports from the time indicate that Iranian diplomats actively engaged with various Afghan factions, using their influence on bridge divides and forge a consensus on the structure and leadership of the interim government. This active participation was seen by many international observers as crucial to the conference's success and the initial political transition in Afghanistan.

In the early years following the US intervention, Iran provided substantial humanitarian aid to Afghanistan. This included food, medical supplies, and assistance with refugee resettlement. While perhaps not direct military cooperation, this aid contributed to the stabilization and well-being of the Afghan population, aligning with the overall goals of the US-led effort to build a more stable Afghanistan.

While the extent is debated, some reports suggest that Iran did share intelligence with the US regarding al-Qaeda and other extremist groups operating in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. Given Iran's long-standing opposition to these Sunni extremist groups, this intelligence sharing, even if limited and tactical, would have been beneficial to the US in its counter-terrorism operations.

The excerpt mentions Iran allowing a US freighter to offload cargo at an Iranian port for onward transit to Afghanistan. This logistical support was a significant gesture that streamlined the supply chain for the US military and aid organizations operating in Afghanistan, demonstrating a practical level of cooperation.

The fact that US and Iranian envoys held multiple meetings, including at the ambassadorial level, in Baghdad in 2004 signifies a significant level of engagement aimed at addressing the shared challenge of stabilizing Iraq. These meetings, even if they didn't resolve all differences, indicate a willingness on both sides to communicate and find common ground in a highly

While perhaps preceding the direct invasion, Iran had long been an opponent of Saddam Hussein's regime. The US ousting of Saddam was, in this sense, a development that aligned with Iran's interests, and their subsequent willingness to discuss stabilization efforts suggests a desire to see a post-Saddam Iraq that was not hostile to them.

While the US maintained sanctions against Iran, there were often waivers and exemptions granted for specific goods, particularly those deemed humanitarian (like food and medicine, although the excerpt highlights other categories). The expansion of exports could be partly attributed to these exemptions, suggesting a degree of pragmatism alongside the tough rhetoric. Researching specific sanction waivers during the Bush years could provide concrete examples.

As the excerpt mentions American oil companies initially seeking to lift sanctions, it's likely that other commercial interests also lobbied for increased trade with Iran, seeing it as a potentially lucrative market. This internal pressure from the business sector could have influenced the administration's approach to allowing certain exports.

The Bush administration's primary focus in the "Axis of Evil" context was often perceived to be on Iraq under Saddam Hussein, particularly in the lead-up to the 2003 invasion. While Iran was included in the

label, the immediate and dominant threat was framed as coming from Iraq. This could explain why some officials might have downplayed the significance of Iran's inclusion in that specific phrase.

The excerpt itself points to divisions within the Bush administration, with the State Department often favoring a more nuanced approach compared to the more hawkish stance of the Pentagon and the Vice-President's office. This internal debate likely led to inconsistencies in policy and messaging.

The "**Axis of Evil**" phrase, as suggested by the excerpt, might have served more as a tool for strategic communication and rallying domestic support rather than a precise and consistently applied policy framework for dealing with each of the named countries. The actual implementation of policy towards Iran might have been more differentiated and less driven solely by that label.

Sometimes, sanctions can have unintended consequences, including creating opportunities for trade in goods that might seem surprising given the political climate. The demand for certain US products in Iran, even under sanctions, could have driven some of the export figures.

Saddam Hussein's regime was a long-time adversary of Iran, having fought a brutal eight-year war in the 1980s. Iran viewed Saddam as a significant threat and likely saw the US-led invasion as an opportunity to remove a hostile dictator from its border. This underlying strategic interest heavily influenced Iran's actions during the initial phase of the invasion.

After the fall of Saddam, Iran facilitated the travel of millions of Shia pilgrims to holy sites in Iraq. This not only strengthened religious ties but also allowed Iran to exert soft power and build relationships with influential Shia figures and communities in Iraq, laying the groundwork for future political influence.

Beyond the Baghdad meetings mentioned, there were other instances of communication and engagement between US and Iranian officials regarding the future of Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the invasion. While these discussions often revealed differing long-term visions, they indicated an initial willingness on Iran's part to participate in shaping the post-Saddam order.

While later accusations of Iranian support for some Sunni insurgents emerged, in the very early period after the invasion, Iran's primary focus was on empowering Shia and Kurdish factions. This inadvertently helped the US in its initial efforts to counter the remnants of the Ba'athist regime and some of the early Sunni extremist groups, who were also hostile to Iran and the Shia population.

Following the invasion, Iran quickly established strong economic ties with Iraq, becoming a major trading partner. Iranian investment and the flow of goods and services helped to stabilize the Iraqi economy to some extent in the face of ongoing security challenges, which could be seen as indirectly supporting the overall stabilization efforts desired by the US.

Iran has deep historical, religious, and cultural ties with Iraq, particularly with the Shia majority. After the removal of Saddam's Ba'athist regime, which had suppressed these ties, Iran was able to leverage these connections to build influence through religious institutions, cultural exchange programs, and support for Shia political parties.

These supporting ideas reinforce the narrative that Iran, despite the public rhetoric from the US, played a complex role in the Iraq War and its immediate aftermath, marked by a degree of cooperation in the short term driven by its own strategic interests, which often aligned with the US goal of removing Saddam Hussein and preventing immediate chaos. This cooperation, however, was ultimately limited and evolved into a more competitive and adversarial relationship as the long-term goals of the two nations in Iraq diverged.

The Grand Bargain

In 2003, furious efforts were made by both Iran and the United States to reach a Grand Bargain. A draft of the agreement can be found in the New York Times archives, along with an edited version highlighting Iran's aims by Ambassador Zarif. According to New York Times columnist Nicholas D. Kristof, these efforts were ultimately derailed by neoconservative hardliners. Central to the proposal was Iran's demand for "Recognition of Iran's legitimate security interests in the region with according defence capacity."

At its core, the Grand Bargain was an attempt to resolve decades of hostility between Washington and Tehran. Iran would be expected to end its nuclear weapons program, sever its ties to terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, and refrain from using force to disrupt the Middle East peace process. In exchange, the U.S. would make key concessions, including lifting all sanctions, unfreezing Iranian assets, and recognizing Iran's role in Gulf security. However, opposition on both sides proved insurmountable. Hardline conservatives in the U.S. were unwilling to abandon their Axis of Evil rhetoric, while Iranian hardliners remained entrenched in their deep-seated hostility toward the West. With so much political baggage on both sides, an official U.S.-Iran-Israel détente seemed all but impossible.

Yet there remains a school of thought that Washington's long-term strategy revolves around bringing Iran back into its orbit, based on the assumption that Arab Shiites would follow. Should the U.S. succeed in drawing Tehran into its camp, it would mark a geopolitical shift that could push Russia out of the region and further bolster Israel's security. More than that, it would allow the West to consolidate its influence in the Gulf under a single power center—Tehran—rather than negotiating with individual rulers across Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Indications of a potential softening in Iran's stance toward Israel have surfaced in recent years, as suggested in an article by Zvi Bar'el in "Haaretz", which examines whether Iran's position could shift following its next presidential election.

But if a Grand Bargain were to be struck, would the U.S. be willing to abandon its Sunni allies? The historical precedent exists—before his downfall, the Shah of Iran served as Washington's key regional proxy. If Iran were to take on that role once again, it would require the U.S. to weaken its Sunni partners, a shift that some argue is already in motion. Washington has long employed strategic balancing to maintain control in the Middle East, keeping Sunni ambitions in check while ensuring Shiite influence does not spiral beyond its control. Some analysts suggest that the U.S. sees Iran as a more stable long-term partner, capable of managing regional affairs in a way that aligns with American interests.

The extent to which the U.S. has already empowered Shiite forces in Iraq raises further questions. A Guardian/BBC investigation revealed that the Pentagon lifted a ban on Iraqi Shiite militias joining Iraq's security forces and the Special Police Commando, whose ranks were increasingly filled with members of violent Shiite groups such as the Badr Brigades. Tasked with quelling the Sunni insurgency, these forces contributed to escalating sectarian tensions. U.S.-funded detention centers were reportedly overseen by individuals with experience in Central America's dirty wars, and commando units working alongside advisors to General Petraeus were linked to widespread torture and the operation of death squads targeting Iraq's Sunni communities. The long-term impact of such policies remains deeply controversial, as they fueled a sectarian divide that continues to shape Iraq's political landscape.

As indicated by the DTIC article, Iran did propose a "grand bargain" to the US in May 2003, offering to discuss all key issues, including its nuclear program and support for terrorism, in exchange for a comprehensive settlement of differences. This supports the paragraph's claim of "furious efforts" towards such a deal.

While the provided search result discusses Trump's strategy, the underlying idea of the US potentially finding strategic value in aligning with Iran, especially regarding regional stability, has been a recurring theme in foreign policy discussions. The concept is that a stable relationship could help manage regional conflicts and balance other powers.

The Modern Diplomacy article notes that the US-led occupation of Iraq dismantled the Sunni-dominated Ba'athist regime and instituted a new political order that disproportionately empowered Shia political factions. This aligns with the paragraph's point about the US potentially empowering Shiites.

Information on the Badr Organization from Wikipedia and UANI confirms that the Badr Brigade, a powerful Shia paramilitary group with ties to Iran, became integrated into the Iraqi security forces after 2003. These sources detail the group's history, its close relationship with Iran, and its significant influence within the Iraqi state, supporting the paragraph's assertion about the Pentagon lifting bans on such militias.

The long-term impact of these policies was devastating. Reports indicate that the Pentagon indirectly armed and financed Shiite death squads through the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, allowing them to carry out extrajudicial killings under the guise of counterterrorism. These groups, emboldened by U.S. support, engaged in systematic torture and targeted assassinations, deepening Iraq's sectarian divide. Washington's approach, whether by design or as an unintended consequence, resulted in strengthening Iran's influence in Iraq. The very forces that the U.S. helped build now serve Tehran's interests, ensuring that Iraq remains firmly within Iran's sphere of influence. The notion that Iraq's leadership is independent becomes increasingly difficult to sustain when its most influential figures have spent years in Iran or maintain close ties with Tehran. In retrospect, U.S. policies not only failed to counter Iranian influence but arguably facilitated it, with Iraq now acting as a crucial extension of Iran's regional ambitions.

The negotiation and implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 is a significant piece of evidence supporting the West's preference for dialogue over military confrontation

with Iran regarding its nuclear program. Despite concerns, the US, along with European powers, engaged in extensive diplomatic negotiations to reach a non-military solution.

Even after the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, European Union members (primarily France, Germany, and the UK) have consistently expressed their commitment to preserving the agreement and have continued to engage in diplomatic efforts with Iran to ensure its compliance. This demonstrates a clear preference for dialogue and a reluctance to abandon the diplomatic path.

The limited heavy weaponry provided to the Free Syrian Army can be partly attributed to concerns about the potential for these weapons to fall into the hands of radical Islamist groups, which could further destabilize the region and potentially benefit adversaries. Additionally, the strong backing of the Assad regime by Iran and Russia created a complex geopolitical landscape where deeper Western intervention risked a larger and more protracted conflict with significant consequences.

While the US and a few other countries have designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, many European nations maintain a distinction between Hezbollah's political wing and its military wing. They engage with Hezbollah politically as a significant force in Lebanese politics, suggesting a pragmatic approach that prioritizes stability in Lebanon over complete isolation of the group.

The reference to American think tanks favoring engagement with Iran aligns with a body of analysis that argues for a more pragmatic approach to Iran, recognizing its regional influence and potential role in addressing shared challenges. Some analysts have suggested that isolating Iran could be counterproductive and that dialogue is necessary to manage conflicts and pursue common interests.

The idea of viewing Iran as a "devil you know" reflects a perspective that acknowledges Iran's established statehood and long history as a regional power, contrasting it with the uncertainties and potential instability arising from the fragmentation of other states or the rise of non-state actors. This viewpoint suggests that engaging with a known entity like Iran might be seen as a more predictable and manageable approach to regional security by some Western policymakers.

Many Sunni states are breaking apart while the Shiite crescent cements itself. For instance, **Sudan** was deliberately sliced into two feuding states. With the Christian South gaining ownership of the country's oil resources, the North was left feeble and impoverished. The independence of South Sudan in 2011 was widely supported by Western powers, including the US. They played a significant role in facilitating the negotiations and providing diplomatic backing for the secession, often citing human rights concerns and the marginalization of the South by the Khartoum government. This aligns with the paragraph's point about the West "slicing" Sudan. In **Libya**, NATO's intervention and the downfall of Muammar Qaddafi have led to chaos, with Benghazi—Libya's second-largest city—demanding autonomy, armed militias terrorizing civilians, and dispossessed Tuareg tribes continuing their fight for independence. Yemen is also unraveling, weighed down by secessionist demands in the South, Houthi violence in the North, and Al-Qaeda exacerbating instability. NATO's military intervention in Libya in 2011, while aimed at protecting civilians from Muammar Gaddafi's forces, resulted in the collapse of the central government. This power vacuum led to the rise of numerous armed militias, regional autonomy demands (like in Benghazi), and the ongoing conflict involving various factions, including Tuareg tribes seeking autonomy in the south. Analysts widely agree that the intervention contributed

to Libya's current fragmented state. **Yemen** is splintering under the weight of secessionist demands in the south, Houthis wreaking violence in the north and Al Qaeda adding fuel to the fire. While the Houthis have their own internal motivations and grievances, the conflict in Yemen has been exacerbated by external involvement, including support for different factions from regional and international powers. This external interference has fuelled the secessionist demands in the south and contributed to the overall splintering of the country. The so-called **Arab Spring**, championed by the United States, resulted in the ousting of Tunisia's President Ben Ali and Egypt's President Mubarak, leaving both countries fractured between Islamist governments backed by Washington and secularist or liberal forces that struggle to maintain influence. In the initial phases of the Arab Spring, the US, under the Obama administration, expressed support for democratic transitions, which in some cases led to the election of Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. This approach was based on the principle of respecting the outcomes of democratic elections, although it later shifted as concerns about these governments grew. In **Egypt**, the Obama administration actively encouraged the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, pressuring President Mohammed Morsi to weaken the military by forcibly retiring the heads of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and replacing them with figures sympathetic to the Brotherhood. This move has led many to question why the US continues to support an organization that, while elected, does not adhere to democratic principles and is in direct conflict with Egypt's pro-Western elites, secularists, moderates, and Coptic Christians.

Oded Yinon's prediction of a divided Egypt, with a separate Coptic Christian state in Upper Egypt, no longer seems as far-fetched. If the Copts feel increasingly marginalized or persecuted under Muslim Brotherhood rule, or if Israel perceives an existential threat, US intervention could be justified. A fractured Egypt, particularly one that cedes the oil and gas-rich Sinai to Israel, would significantly strengthen the Jewish state's economic and security position. As Sunni states struggle to survive, Iran continues to expand its military capabilities and terror networks, accelerate nuclear development, fund and arm Shiite minorities, and spread its ideological influence across the region. Despite Tehran's repeated denials, the world may soon wake up to a nuclear-armed Iran, at which point the Islamic Republic will be able to dictate terms to the West. Unless the United States and its allies are willing to risk nuclear confrontation, the Gulf may ultimately fall under Shiite control, with the same flag that flies over Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria today extending its reach further.

Iran's influence is not confined to the Middle East. Former CIA operative Reza Khalili, who infiltrated Iran's Revolutionary Guard, describes in *A Time to Betray* how Tehran has positioned tens of thousands of agents across Latin America. He cites a member of Iran's Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution who stated on Iranian state television: "We must get ready for global operations. Our fellow fighters are present in all five continents of the world. An international jihad must be provoked. We must fear no one."

Other Arab leaders expressed similar concerns, including former President Mubarak who confirmed that Iraq belongs to the Shia' that's always loyal to Iran in preference to their own states. The idea that the US inadvertently gifted Iraq to Iran doesn't ring true unless we accept that America's top minds are brainless.

Some geopolitical analysts argue that the intense public rhetoric between the US and Iran serves to solidify their respective domestic bases of support. For Iran, the image of the “Great Satan” helps maintain ideological cohesion and justify the Islamic Republic’s policies. For the US, the portrayal of Iran as a rogue state threatening regional stability and possessing nuclear ambitions helps garner support for military spending and alliances in the Middle East.

Iranian state-controlled media frequently utilizes anti-American and anti-Israeli rhetoric to rally public support and project an image of resistance against foreign powers. This reinforces the idea that the “Great Satan” narrative is actively employed by the Iranian regime for its own purposes.

The perceived threat from Iran has been a consistent justification for the significant US military presence in the Arabian Gulf. This presence allows the US to project power, secure oil routes, and maintain its influence in a strategically vital region. The Iranian “threat” thus serves a tangible purpose for US foreign policy.

The rise of Shia political power in Iraq after the US invasion, the significant role of Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Assad regime’s Alawite (Shia-affiliated) leadership in Syria are often cited as evidence of a growing Shia influence across the Middle East, forming a geographical “crescent” as King Abdullah warned. Some analysts argue that the US, in its efforts to dismantle Saddam Hussein’s Sunni-dominated Ba’athist regime and establish a new political order in Iraq, deliberately favored the Shia majority who had been historically marginalized. This was seen by some as a pragmatic approach to building a new government, even if it inadvertently benefited Iran’s regional influence.

The concerns expressed by King Abdullah and former President Mubarak reflect a broader anxiety among many Sunni Arab leaders about the increasing influence of Iran and Shia-led movements in the region. They often perceive this rise as a threat to their own power and the traditional balance of power in the Middle East.

Middle East Aflame

The assertion that the Middle East in the early 1980s was relatively stable and nearing economic parity with the West before becoming engulfed in conflict lacks strong historical support. The region had already faced multiple Arab-Israeli wars, internal political struggles, and Cold War rivalries, making claims of prior stability questionable. While it is true that both Iran and Iraq were armed by Western powers leading up to their eight-year war, attributing the conflict solely to a “divide and rule” strategy oversimplifies the complex historical, territorial, political, and ideological factors that fueled it. Saddam Hussein’s regional ambitions and the instability following the Iranian Revolution were key drivers, and while the US later supported Iraq, this was a pragmatic response to the perceived threat of revolutionary Iran rather than a pre-planned strategy. Similarly, Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982, which led to the emergence of Hezbollah with Iranian and Syrian support, was a direct response to PLO activities. While the US and Britain were diplomatically involved, there is no direct evidence to suggest they orchestrated these events as part of a broader “divide and rule” agenda.

If one accepts the premise that Israel acts as a proxy for US interests in the Middle East, the 1982 paper *A Strategy for Israel in the 1980s* by Oded Yinon, published in the World Zionist Organisation journal *Kivunim*, provides insight into perceived Israeli and US objectives. The paper outlines a vision in which Israel would benefit from the fragmentation of its Arab neighbors into smaller, weaker entities based on ethnic and religious divisions. Yinon argued that the dissolution of Syria and Iraq into sectarian mini-states, similar to Lebanon's composition, was a primary strategic goal. "Syria will fall apart, in accordance with its ethnic and religious structure, into several states so that there will be a Shiite Allawi state along its coast, a Sunni state in the Aleppo area, another Sunni state in Damascus and the Druzes will set up a state maybe even on our Golan," he wrote. This strategy, if still influential, could be interpreted as aligning with the current instability in the region.

The ongoing instability in southern Syria provides a contemporary example of this fragmentation. Even after the Syrian government regained control over much of the Daraa, Quneitra, and Suwayda governorates, the region remains unstable. Various factions, including former rebels, local militias, and groups with alleged ties to ISIS, continue to operate, indicating the persistence of localized power centers rather than a unified state authority. Clashes between these groups, as well as between them and Syrian government forces, contribute to a fragmented security landscape. Recent reports detail ongoing security challenges in Daraa, including assassinations and armed confrontations. The Druze-majority Suwayda governorate has maintained a degree of autonomy, with local leaders often making independent decisions regarding governance and security. Recent tensions between the Syrian government and local Druze factions, particularly over issues like conscription, illustrate the region's unique ethnic and religious identity with limited central authority.

Israel's ongoing airstrikes in Syria, officially targeting Iranian-backed militias and Hezbollah operatives, have been cited by some analysts as contributing to the weakening of the central Syrian government. In late 2024 and early 2025, reports detailed alleged Israeli strikes in the Quneitra area, near the Golan Heights. There has also been long-standing, though unverified, claims of Israel providing support to certain rebel groups or local factions in southern Syria, particularly near the Golan Heights, possibly to create a buffer zone. While publicly confirmed evidence of such support remains scarce, these claims persist in regional analyses. The ongoing instability, the presence of localized power centers, the intermittent clashes, and the relative autonomy of regions like Suwayda could be interpreted as steps toward the fragmentation of Syria along existing ethnic and religious lines, as envisioned in the Yinon document.

Yinon's paper extends this concept beyond Syria, asserting that "the entire Arabian Peninsula is a natural candidate for dissolution due to internal and external pressures." He highlights the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Libya, and Egypt as holding significant economic and strategic value, particularly due to their wealth in oil and financial resources. Jordan, in particular, is singled out as a target for restructuring. "There is no chance that Jordan will continue to exist in its present structure for a long time, and Israel's policy, both in war and in peace, ought to be directed at the liquidation of Jordan under the present regime and the transfer of power to the Palestinian majority," Yinon states.

The events following the October 7th attack, including the extensive destruction in Gaza and discussions regarding the resettlement of Palestinians, can be interpreted by some through the lens

of the Yinon document. The destruction in Gaza might be seen as aligning with the broader theme of weakening potential adversaries, particularly if Gaza is viewed as a stronghold of groups hostile to Israel. Furthermore, controversial discussions about Palestinian resettlement, while not official Israeli policy and facing strong international opposition, could be interpreted as a contemporary manifestation of the idea of transferring Palestinian populations for strategic advantage, even though the original document focused on Jordan. These interpretations suggest a potential alignment of current events with the strategy's broader themes of weakening neighboring Arab entities and potentially reshaping demographics. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these are interpretations, and the stated intentions behind Israel's military actions are to respond to the October 7th attacks and ensure the safety of its citizens. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is multifaceted, and attributing current events solely to a decades-old strategy oversimplifies the complex interplay of factors at play, including the immediate triggers of the recent conflict and the strong international opposition to any forced displacement of Palestinians.

It is noteworthy that Yinon's paper, written in the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, makes no mention of Iran as an adversary. This suggests that at the time, Israel did not view Iran as a primary strategic threat. Instead, the focus appeared to be on the fragmentation of Sunni-majority states. However, historical events following the paper's publication complicate this perspective. The Iran-Contra affair, for example, exposed secret US and Israeli dealings with Iran during the 1980s, even as Iran was officially considered an enemy. The "Tipped Kettle" operation involved weapons stolen by Israel from the PLO in Lebanon being transferred to Iran during its war with Iraq, reportedly as part of a deal to secure the release of Western hostages held by Hezbollah. Furthermore, Iran allegedly facilitated Israel's bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor in 1981.

In more recent history, US-Iran relations have continued to exhibit contradictions. Investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported that in the mid-2000s, the US Joint Special Operations Command trained members of the Iranian opposition group Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK), despite the group's designation as a terrorist organization at the time. Training allegedly took place in Nevada under the Department of Energy's oversight, with MEK operatives being prepared for long-distance deployments in desert and mountain terrain. While this training ended before Barack Obama took office, the MEK's trajectory suggests continued Western engagement. Following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the MEK maintained a significant presence at Camp Ashraf before relocating to Albania with US and UN assistance. In 2012, the US State Department officially removed the MEK from its list of foreign terrorist organizations, allowing for more open engagement. Since then, the group has held rallies attended by former US officials advocating for regime change in Iran.

While Hersh's reporting suggests covert US support for the MEK in the past, there is no publicly confirmed evidence of ongoing military training under recent administrations. However, the MEK has continued to attract high-profile Western political endorsements. The delisting of the group as a terrorist organization and its relocation to Albania marked a shift from covert operations toward overt political engagement. Despite this shift, the MEK remains a controversial actor in regional politics, illustrating the continued complexities of external involvement in Iran's opposition movements.

As Sunni states gasp for oxygen, the Islamic Republic of Iran is actively engaged in expanding its military capabilities and terror networks, developing its nuclear potential, arming and funding Shiite minorities and disseminating its ideology throughout the region. Despite denials from the Iranian mullahs, the world could wake up one day to a nuclear armed Iran when Tehran will be empowered to dictate terms to the West. In that case, unless the West is willing to risk nuclear Armageddon, it will likely hand over the Gulf to Shiite control under the same flag that flies over Iraq, Lebanon and Syria today.

Numerous reports from organizations like the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) track Iran's military expenditure, which has shown an upward trend in recent years. Additionally, Iran has regularly unveiled domestically produced military hardware, indicating an active effort to expand its capabilities.

The US Department of State annually publishes reports on terrorism, which consistently highlight Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism, detailing its support for groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and other Shia militias in Iraq and Yemen. These reports provide concrete examples of Iran's involvement in regional terror networks.

Regular reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) have documented Iran's increasing enrichment of uranium, including to levels that are closer to weapons-grade. While Iran maintains its program is for peaceful purposes, these reports raise concerns about its potential to quickly develop nuclear weapons.

Numerous reports and analyses detail Iran's provision of arms, training, and financial support to the Houthi rebels in Yemen, who have been engaged in a prolonged conflict with the Saudi-led coalition. This support has significantly bolstered the Houthis' military capabilities and prolonged the conflict.

Experts in international security have extensively analyzed the potential consequences of a nuclear-armed Iran. Many fear it could trigger a nuclear arms race in the Middle East, destabilize the region, and embolden Iran to act more aggressively, potentially dictating terms to its neighbors and the West.

Leaders from Sunni-majority Gulf states have frequently voiced their concerns about Iran's growing regional influence, its support for proxy groups, and its nuclear ambitions, often calling on the international community to take a stronger stance against Tehran.

Iran's tentacles have spread far and wide. Former CIA operative and author of **"A Time to Betray"** **Reza Khalili**, who successfully infiltrated Iran's Revolutionary Guard as an undercover agent wrote: *"Iran has expanded its terror network and now has tens of thousands of agents in Latin America. Khalili quotes a member of Iran's Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution as saying on Iranian State TV: "We must get ready for global operation. Our fellow fighters are present on all five continents of the world. An international jihad must be provoked. We must fear no one."*

The US State Department and other government agencies have periodically issued reports detailing Iran's global reach and its involvement in activities that could be considered part of a broader terror network. These reports often highlight Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force as the primary entity responsible for these extraterritorial operations.

There have been reported instances and foiled plots in various regions, including Latin America, that have been linked to Iranian operatives or proxies. Examples sometimes cited include the AMIA bombing in Argentina in the 1990s and more recent alleged plots in other South American countries. While Iran denies involvement, these incidents contribute to the narrative of a global reach.

Iran actively engages in cultural diplomacy and promotes its ideology through various channels in different parts of the world. While not directly terrorism, this outreach can help build networks of sympathizers and potential recruits who could be mobilized for other purposes if needed. Organizations and cultural centers supported by Iran operate in numerous countries.

Iran has cultivated relationships with certain countries and non-state actors in regions beyond the Middle East that could potentially facilitate its global reach. For example, its ties with Venezuela and some leftist groups in Latin America have been noted by analysts as potential avenues for expanding influence.

Numerous experts on terrorism and Iranian foreign policy have expressed concerns about Iran's global ambitions and its capacity to project power and influence through both direct and indirect means. These experts often point to the IRGC's global footprint and its history of supporting militant groups.

Future of Western Powers and Iran

Western powers have long grappled with their approach to Iran, balancing between confrontation and accommodation. While each U.S. administration has adopted different strategies, the underlying reality remains: Iran's geopolitical significance makes a complete isolation strategy difficult to sustain.

The Obama administration and the EU responded to the perceived Iranian nuclear threat by imposing sanctions on Iran's oil, banking, and trade sectors. However, while these sanctions were expected to have an impact, they proved ineffective as long as Russia, China, India, and Iran's main trading partners continued to find ways to circumvent them in Iran's favor. Additionally, it was widely known that Western banks and corporations, through intermediaries, were involved in marketing Iranian oil and laundering its proceeds.

The Trump administration, during its first term, pursued a "maximum pressure" policy on Iran, enforcing strict sanctions targeting its economy to compel compliance on nuclear issues. However, these efforts were undermined as countries like China, Russia, and India found ways to bypass U.S. restrictions and maintain economic ties with Iran. Trump also withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal signed during the Obama administration, allowing him to impose even stricter sanctions. Despite these measures, evidence indicated that some Western businesses and financial institutions, often through intermediaries, facilitated the sale of Iranian oil and the laundering of its profits.

The Biden administration, while maintaining significant sanctions, shifted toward a diplomatic approach by seeking to restore the Iran nuclear deal. Yet, like its predecessors, it struggled to prevent Iran's trade partners from bypassing restrictions, ultimately limiting the effectiveness of U.S. measures.

The broader message is that Western powers will always seek accommodation with powerful nations that can protect their interests, even if weaker states are left to bear the consequences. Further evidence of a quiet accommodation with Iran can be seen in the U.S. stance on the Arab Spring.

Israeli writer Yaron Friedman predicted that the political realities following the “Arab Spring” would ignite sectarian clashes between Sunnis and Shiites, with the Arabian Gulf emerging as the main battleground. This is already evident in Bahrain and, to a lesser extent, in eastern Saudi Arabia. However, both countries managed to suppress sectarian protests through excessive force in the name of national security.

Former CIA field operative and author Robert Baer, in his book *The Devil We Know*, supports this argument. He asserts that America’s reliance on weak Sunni regimes is misguided and that Iran, as a more powerful and stable force, is a better strategic partner. Baer advises the U.S. to engage Iran in diplomatic negotiations without preconditions.

Similarly, Iranian-born American Middle East analyst Vali Nasr, in *The Shia Revival*, notes that Shiites have embraced the decline of Sunni dominance and the prospects for political change. This, in principle, makes them more inclined to cooperate with the United States.

Obama’s Pentagon chief, Chuck Hagel, echoed a similar sentiment. In a 2007 speech at Rutgers University, he stated:

“In the Middle East of the 21st century, Iran will be a key centre of gravity... a significant regional power. The United States cannot change that reality. America’s strategic 21st-century regional policy for the Middle East must acknowledge the role of Iran today and over the next 25 years.”

Hagel highlighted Iran’s cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan, where both countries worked toward defeating the Taliban, stabilizing the region, and curbing opium production. He argued that the U.S. must develop a new diplomatic strategy that integrates its regional allies, military power, and economic influence to engage with Iran.

In his book *America: Our Next Chapter*, Hagel reinforces this idea:

“America is the Great Power – not Iran. Because of the awesome responsibility that comes with such power, it falls to us to advance the proposition that the United States and Iran can overcome decades of mutual mistrust, suspicion, and hostility.”

Iran and Israel

The idea that US-Israel enmity toward Iran is partly theatrical has been suggested by various analysts who argue that each side benefits politically and strategically from the ongoing tension.

For Iran, hostility toward the US and Israel strengthens its domestic narrative of resistance, rallying nationalist and religious support while reinforcing its leadership among Shiite populations across the region. Iran’s anti-Israel and anti-US rhetoric also helps it maintain influence in places like Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.

For Israel, portraying Iran as an existential threat justifies its security policies, military actions, and continued US military and financial support. It also reinforces Israel's position as a regional power and enables it to rally Western allies against Tehran.

For the US, Iran's status as a 'rogue state' helps justify Washington's military presence in the Gulf, ensuring influence over the region's vast oil and gas resources. It also strengthens US arms sales to Gulf allies, who see Iran as a direct threat.

While the hostility between these powers is real, its intensity may be exaggerated or strategically managed to serve broader geopolitical objectives.

Iran-Israel Cooperation

During the era of the Shah, Israeli-Iranian dealings were numerous but conducted in secrecy. The Iranian intelligence service, SAVAK, maintained a strong relationship with the Mossad, which secretly trained its operatives, pilots, paratroopers, and military leaders in interrogation and repression techniques used to suppress dissent in Iran. The covert nature of these relations was underscored by Ben-Gurion's secret visit to Tehran in 1961, paving the way for further high-level meetings. Prime Minister Golda Meir later attempted—unsuccessfully—to persuade the Shah to bring these ties into the open, visiting Tehran in May 1972 at his invitation. The Shah himself described his relationship with Israel as one of "true love."

The cooperation between Iran and Israel extended into the strategic realm, particularly after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Iran played a key role in facilitating Israeli energy security by collaborating on a pipeline to the Mediterranean Sea, completed in December 1969. Over the years, several Israeli leaders, including Levi Eshkol, Yitzhak Rabin, Menachem Begin, Yigal Allon, and Moshe Dayan, visited Iran in secret, with their primary host being Nematollah Nasiri, the Iranian deputy prime minister and head of security services.

Declassified CIA and State Department documents reveal that Mossad and SAVAK engaged in joint operations since the late 1950s. Israeli intelligence provided Iran with reports on Egyptian activities in Arab states, developments in Iraq, and communist movements affecting Iranian security. Mossad also assisted SAVAK's operations and supported the Kurdish insurgency in Iraq. As part of broader regional intelligence cooperation, Israel, Iran, and Turkey formally established the Trident Organization in 1958—a trilateral liaison between Mossad, Iran's National Organization for Intelligence and Security (SAVAK), and Turkey's National Security Service (TNSS). The overarching goal of Israel's relationship with Iran was to cultivate pro-Israel and anti-Arab policies within Tehran's ruling circles, effectively breaking the Arab encirclement of Israel by aligning with non-Arab Muslim nations.

Despite the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent anti-Israel rhetoric of the new regime, Israel remained one of Iran's covert backers during the eight-year-long Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). In 1981 alone, Israeli military industries sold Iran an estimated \$75 million worth of weaponry, including anti-tank guns, spare parts for tanks and aircraft, and TOW missiles, which were transported via Argentine airlines and then shipped to Iran. Between 1981 and 1983, Israeli arms sales to Iran were estimated at

\$500 million, with much of the payment made through oil bartering, suggesting that the relationship between the two countries has taken a competitive norm over increasing influence in the Middle East, making it possible that the two countries can conclude a secret deal to maintain their areas of influence in the Middle East.

Iranian arms dealer Ahmad Haidari, who worked with the Khomeini regime, later disclosed that as much as 80 percent of the weaponry Iran purchased at the onset of the war came from Israel. Israeli arms dealer Ya'acov Nimrodi admitted to cooperating with Iran's Ministry of Defense in a deal worth over \$135 million, supplying Lance missiles, Copperhead shells, and Hawk missiles.

According to Mark Phythian, author of *Arming Iraq: How the US and Britain Secretly Built Saddam's War Machine*, the Iranian Air Force's ability to function after Saddam Hussein's initial assault—and even to conduct airstrikes on Baghdad—was largely due to the Reagan administration's decision to allow Israel to transfer American-made weapons and spare parts to Iran. In 1982, *Aerospace Daily* reported that Israeli and US support was “crucial” in keeping Iran's air force operational during the war. Additionally, Iran provided intelligence assistance to Israel to bomb the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1982 in an operation called “opera”. It is also alleged that Iran permitted the

Israel's decision to back Iran during the Iran-Iraq War was driven by strategic calculations rather than ideological alignment. Israeli analyst and journalist Ronen Bergman argues that Israel sought to regain influence over Iran while simultaneously prolonging the conflict to weaken both Iran and Iraq. By doing so, Israel aimed to prevent Saddam Hussein—who was perceived as a major threat—from emerging victorious. Similarly, Trita Parsi suggests that Israel's support for Iran was motivated by its view of Saddam as a destabilizing force in the region, particularly in relation to the peace process. Saddam's unwavering support for the Palestinian cause strengthened Palestinian negotiators, making his regime a significant geopolitical concern for Israel.

In *Treacherous Alliance*, Trita Parsi highlights Iran's complex dual approach: while secretly collaborating with Israel on security matters, Tehran intensified its public rhetoric against Israel to mask these dealings. This strategy, according to Parsi, was likely a compromise between different factions within the Iranian government—balancing ideological commitments with pragmatic strategic interests.

Iran's cooperation with Israel reportedly extended beyond arms deals. In 1982, Tehran allegedly provided intelligence and logistical support for Israel's bombing of Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, including access to Iraqi plans and airspace. David Menashri, a leading Iran expert at Tel Aviv University, noted that throughout the 1980s, the notion of an “Iranian threat” was virtually absent from Israeli discourse.

D.S. Hurrell, in his article *Persians, Spartans and Republicans*, contends that Ayatollah Khomeini, despite his outward hostility toward Israel, resumed a covert relationship with Israeli intelligence agencies. A special runway, far from Tehran's main air terminal, was reportedly constructed to facilitate the discreet arrival of Israeli personnel. According to an Iranian foreign policy expert, Iran's opposition to Israel was largely rhetorical before the revolution, but once faced with the realities of governance, it adopted a more pragmatic stance—publicly condemning Israel while engaging in behind-the-scenes collaboration.

Despite overwhelming evidence of past cooperation, Iran continues to vehemently deny any history of working with Israel, maintaining its official stance of hostility toward the Jewish state.

Netanyahu- The boy who cried the wolf

Israel's portrayal of Iran as its greatest existential threat, particularly under Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, has long been a central theme in Israeli security discourse. Netanyahu's repeated warnings about Iran's nuclear ambitions have, at times, drawn comparisons to the fable of "the boy who cried wolf." His rhetoric stands in contrast to that of his former political mentor, Ariel Sharon, who—despite his hawkish reputation—once advised that Israel should "leave a small window open" for future relations with Iran. Despite his strict refusal to allow Iran to possess nuclear weapons, Israel under Sharon rule shared the same interest with Iran about supporting the USA invasion to Iraq, as they both perceived the Saddam Hussien regime as a threat.

In recent years, skepticism over the necessity of military action against Iran has grown even within Israel's security establishment. Five former Mossad chiefs have publicly opposed a preemptive strike on Iran, dismissing it as "madness." Among them, Ephraim Halevy has argued that Iran does not pose an existential threat to Israel and that preventing Tehran from obtaining nuclear weapons capability is achievable without the use of force.

Trita Parsi provides further insight into Israel's security calculus. When asked about Israel's internal assessment of a potential Iranian nuclear threat, he noted that Israel's primary concern is not that Iran would launch a nuclear attack but rather that a nuclear-capable Iran could strike a deal with the United States. Such a development would shift the regional balance of power away from Israel, limiting its ability to act unilaterally—particularly regarding the Palestinian issue. If Israel fears that a U.S.-Iranian rapprochement could erode its strategic dominance, the same principle applies to the Gulf States, which also seek to counter Iranian influence. This justifies why Israel is currently keen on preventing Iran from being nuclear, as nuclear Iran would counterbalance Israeli influence in the Middle East, preventing it from acting as a hegemon.

Despite decades of hostility between the two nations, Iran and Israel share a complex, often contradictory history. This is reflected in the Iranian Jewish community, which, despite its deep roots in Iran, has also contributed to Israeli society. Today, approximately 250,000 Iranian Jews live in Israel, many of whom hold influential positions but retain strong ties to their country of origin. Notably, most Iranian Jews resisted financial incentives to immigrate to Israel. Even under the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—who was known for his Holocaust denial and anti-Israel rhetoric—the Iranian Jewish community remained politically active in Iran, with reports indicating that a majority supported Ahmadinejad in the 2010 elections. The BBC even highlighted that his administration made a monetary contribution to a Jewish hospital in Tehran, one of only four Jewish charity hospitals worldwide. This stands as a rare example of state-supported Jewish institutions in a country where foreign-funded organizations often face scrutiny over concerns of external influence.

Business is Business

Despite public hostility, Israel and Iran have engaged in covert business dealings for years, particularly in arms sales, technology, and trade through intermediaries. One of the most notable cases was the 2011 scandal involving the Israeli shipping and transport company Ofer Brothers, which was accused of illegally trading with Iran. The company sold a tanker to Tehran and transported petroleum products to and from Iran via an Iranian front company. Israeli officials denied involvement, but suspicions grew when a discussion in the Knesset Economic Affairs Committee was abruptly halted by the Defense Ministry's security chief, a former Ofer Brothers board member. The U.S. State Department blacklisted the company, only to remove it a year later. BBC reported on the controversy at the time.

Trade between the two nations has reportedly taken place through indirect channels. Iranian markets have occasionally been found selling Israeli produce, such as apples, oranges, and cherries. This has led to questions directed at Tehran's Ministry by Iranian exporters and importers about how such goods made their way into the country. Iran is also believed to import various agricultural and industrial products from Israel, including organic fertilizers, artificial hormones to boost milk production, irrigation pipes, and seeds. In return, Israeli companies have allegedly sourced Iranian products such as marble, cashews, and pistachios, often through third-party countries to bypass trade restrictions.

Earlier in 1997, Israeli businessman Nahum Manbar was imprisoned for selling chemical weapons components to Iran. Mossad insider Victor Ostrovsky later revealed that Manbar had connections with Israel's intelligence services but was abandoned as a scapegoat when the deal became public. Manbar himself claimed that his transactions with Iran were approved by Israeli security officials, yet he was sentenced to 16 years in prison, unlike the Ofer Brothers, who faced no consequences. Haaretz detailed his case.

Despite Iran's anti-Israel rhetoric, reports suggest that Israeli companies have continued indirect trade with Iran via third-party countries. In 2011, Ynetnews reported that "dozens of Israeli companies" were secretly doing business with Iran, amounting to "tens of millions of dollars a year." Yehoshua Meiri, Chairman of the Israel-Arab Friendship Association, stated that business interests often take precedence over political tensions, with strong working relations between Israeli and Iranian colleagues.

Another example of secret dealings surfaced in the case of Ben Zygier, also known as "Prisoner X," an Australian-Israeli citizen allegedly involved in a Mossad front company that sold electronic equipment and other goods to Iran. In 2009, Australian journalist Jason Koutsoukis confronted Zygier about his involvement, and shortly afterward, Zygier was arrested by Israeli authorities. Reports suggest that he had been carrying classified intelligence, possibly intended for Hezbollah, before his mysterious death in Ayalon Prison in 2010. The Independent covered the story in detail.

Inside Iran

Ahmedinejad Jewish Ancestry

The claim that former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has Jewish ancestry originates from a 2009 *Daily Telegraph* article by Damien McElroy and Ahmad Vahdat, which analyzed a photograph of Ahmadinejad's identity card. The article suggested that his original surname, *Sabourjian*, indicated Jewish heritage, as it was reportedly a name associated with Jewish cloth weavers in Iran. The piece speculated that his family had converted to Islam and changed their name to Ahmadinejad to assimilate into Iranian society.

Experts cited in the article, such as Ali Nourizadeh from the Centre for Arab and Iranian Studies, suggested that Ahmadinejad's harsh anti-Israel rhetoric could have been a form of overcompensation to obscure his family's Jewish past. Others, including a London-based expert on Iranian Jewry, pointed to the *-jian* suffix as further evidence of Jewish lineage, a claim echoed by *Foreign Policy* magazine contributor Jamsheed K. Choksy, who linked Ahmadinejad's trajectory to a broader historical pattern of converts seeking to distance themselves from their former faith.

However, the claim remains controversial and lacks definitive proof. Critics argue that *Sabourjian* is not exclusively a Jewish name and that the assertion oversimplifies complex socio-religious dynamics in Iran. Furthermore, Ahmadinejad himself has never acknowledged Jewish ancestry, and Iranian authorities have suppressed investigations into his background, including the arrest of Dr. Mehdi Khazali, a conservative figure who blogged about the topic.

Iran's Jewish Community vs other groups

Iran's Jewish community, estimated at around 25,000, is the largest in the Middle East outside Israel and enjoys a relatively high degree of protection and freedom. Despite Iran's official hostility toward Israel and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's inflammatory statements, Iranian Jews have maintained their religious and cultural identity. The Iranian government has granted them freedom of movement, access to synagogues, and Hebrew schools. In contrast, other minority groups, such as Sunni Arabs and Ahwazi Arabs, face significant discrimination.

Iranian Jews have resisted financial incentives to immigrate to Israel, emphasizing their commitment to remaining in their homeland. Some years ago, Israel reportedly offered them financial inducements of \$10,000 per person to relocate, but the community rejected the offer, asserting that their identity was not for sale. There are reportedly 11 synagogues and multiple kosher butcher shops in Tehran, while no Sunni Mosque exists in the capital.

The U.S. State Department's claims that Iranian Jews face discrimination were met with strong criticism from Iran's Jewish community. The Association of Tehrani Jews issued a statement refuting these claims, asserting that they are free to practice their faith without restrictions.

New York Times columnist Roger Cohen, himself Jewish, echoed these sentiments, describing Iranian civility towards Jews as a reflection of the country's cultural sophistication. He argued that the portrayal of Iran as a nation ruled by "mad mullahs" is both misleading and dangerous.

Further highlighting the complexities of Iran's stance on Israel, one of Ahmadinejad's top advisors, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, once advocated for "friendly ties" with Israel, a sentiment Ahmadinejad himself endorsed at the time. These contradictions suggest that Iran's official rhetoric against Israel does not necessarily reflect the lived reality of its Jewish population.

Sunni Islam was the dominant form of Islam in Persia following its conquest by the Caliphate of Umar ibn Al-Khattab, a companion of the Prophet Mohammed and the second Caliph of the Rashidun Caliphate. Under his rule, which began on August 23, 634, the entire Sassanid Persian Empire and over two-thirds of the Eastern Roman Empire came under Muslim control. Persia remained predominantly Sunni for centuries, producing renowned scholars and poets such as Al-Ghazali, Saadi, and Hafez.

It was not until the 16th century, under the Safavid dynasty, that Iran became a stronghold of Twelver Shiism. The Safavids, who had their religious origins in Sufism, aggressively eradicated Sunni Islam and declared Shiism the official state religion. They forcibly converted populations, executed Sunni notables who refused to comply, and institutionalized the public cursing of early Sunni caliphs such as Abu Bakr and Umar. Safavid loyalists, known as Tabarraian, patrolled the streets enforcing this practice, with non-compliance often resulting in execution. Historian Roger Savory notes that in the early Safavid period, cursing Sunni figures was a religious obligation, and outright massacres occurred in cities such as Shiraz. Colin Turner further describes how Sunni Muslims were declared impure (najis), equating them with dogs, swine, and infidels. This historical sectarian policy continues to influence Iran's treatment of its Sunni minority today.

Iran's government systematically discriminates against its Sunni population, estimated to be around eight million, though some claim the number could be as high as 20 million. Sunnis, consisting of Arabs, Baluchis, Turkmen, and Kurds, are denied their political, legal, social, cultural, and economic rights. Their regions suffer from severe neglect, lacking adequate schools, hospitals, and infrastructure. Sunni religious practices are heavily restricted—new mosques and religious schools are forbidden, and existing ones have either been left in disrepair, demolished, converted into private residences, or seized by the authorities. There is no Sunni Mosque in Tehran, and worshippers who once prayed at the Pakistani embassy on Fridays and during Eid were eventually barred from attending.

Repression extends to Sunni scholars and clerics, many of whom are arrested or killed under suspicious circumstances, often staged as traffic accidents. Sunni political representation in Parliament is minimal and does not reflect their actual numbers. Candidates for government positions must first demonstrate loyalty to Shiite principles, further marginalizing the Sunni community.

Beyond sectarian discrimination, ethnic Arabs in the oil-rich region of Al-Ahwaz, known as Khuzestan in Iran, face systemic marginalization. Since the region's occupation under the Shah, Ahwazi Arabs have been deprived of basic services such as electricity and clean water, despite residing in one of the country's most resource-rich areas. Economic opportunities remain limited, with Persians dominating managerial positions in the oil industry while Arabs are relegated to lower-tier jobs.

Amnesty International has reported widespread land expropriation, suggesting a deliberate policy of dispossession. Cultural suppression is also evident, as Arabic is banned in government ministries and schools, and birth certificates are only issued to those with Persian names.

Religious persecution intersects with ethnic discrimination, particularly for Ahwazi Arabs who convert to Sunni Islam. In 2007, six Ahwazi Arabs were sentenced to death on charges of being “enemies of God” for embracing Sunni Islam, giving their children Sunni names, and displaying the white Ahwazi flag. Such trials, widely condemned by the UN, the EU, and human rights organizations, highlight Iran’s ongoing repression of its Arab population.

Iran as a threat to the region

Sunni clerics have increasingly voiced concerns about Iran’s efforts to convert Sunni Arabs to Shiism, viewing it as part of a broader Iranian strategy to expand its influence in the region. In March 2013, Egyptian preacher Safwat Hijazi warned that Iran was sending Shiite missionaries disguised as tourists to Egypt, stating that Iran “stirs up problems wherever it exists and works to spread Shiism in Sunni countries.”

The phenomenon of Sunnis converting to Shiism, known as *tashayyu’*, has been observed in several predominantly Sunni countries, including Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Sudan, and Morocco. In a 2007 article published in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, Israel Elad-Altman attributes this trend to “intensive Iranian missionary activity” and the perception among some Sunni Arabs that Iran and Hezbollah are the only forces effectively standing up to the United States and Israel. This political admiration, he argues, has influenced the religious sphere, leading to an increase in conversions to Shiism.

Although exact figures are difficult to determine, Sunni communities are increasingly alarmed by what they perceive as a “sinister religious and ideological invasion” by Iran. Critics often describe this trend as a revival of the Safavid-era policy of Shiitization, referencing the Safavid dynasty’s forced conversion of Sunni populations in Persia and its broader campaign to spread Shiism.

In Egypt, an estimated 750,000 Shiites make up about one percent of the population, with the rate of conversion reportedly increasing. In Jordan, several hundred families have converted, influenced by the large influx of Iraqi Shiites since 2003. Jordanian authorities consider this shift a potential national security risk, suspecting Iranian objectives behind it.

Algeria has also witnessed efforts to spread Shiism. In 2006, the country’s Minister of Education dismissed eleven teachers accused of conducting Shiite missionary work in schools. Reports suggest that teachers from Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon have been instrumental in promoting Shiism, prompting the Algerian Religious Affairs Ministry to investigate groups advocating the rejection of Sunnism in favor of Shiism.

In Morocco, Iranian-linked Shiite institutions in Europe—particularly in Spain and Belgium—are believed to be proselytizing among Moroccan migrants.

In Sudan, Sunni religious organizations have launched campaigns against Iranian missionary activities. The Supreme Council for Coordination among Islamic Associations has warned of what it describes as a conspiracy led by Shiite converts and Iranian-backed organizations to spread Shiism. Reports claim that entire villages have converted, and that Shiite mosques and religious centers have proliferated in Khartoum.

The most intense Iranian missionary activity, however, is occurring in Syria, Iran's closest ally. Iranian pilgrims visit Shiite shrines in Syria in large numbers, and seminaries have been established to attract new converts. The influx of Iraqi Shiites since 2003 has further contributed to the sectarian shift.

These developments have alarmed prominent Sunni scholars. Sheikh Yusuf Al-Qaradawi, head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, accused Iran of infiltrating Egypt to convert Egyptians to Shiism and criticized Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah as a fanatic. In 2007, at a conference on religious rapprochement in Doha, Qaradawi condemned Iran's efforts to spread Shiism, calling them "well-programmed and organized."

Other Sunni scholars have echoed these concerns. Saudi cleric Sheikh Salman bin Fahd Al-Awdah warned that Iranian-backed Shiite expansion in the Levant and other Sunni regions was "playing with fire." Sheikh Abdullah bin Abd Al-Rahman Al-Jabrin issued a fatwa prohibiting support for Hezbollah, arguing that the group was aiding Iran's regional ambitions.

The Muslim Brotherhood has generally avoided taking a strong stance on the issue, instead emphasizing the unity of Islam. During the 2006 Lebanon War, the Brotherhood's Supreme Guide expressed full support for Hezbollah, arguing that sectarian disputes should be set aside in favor of confronting a common Zionist enemy. However, growing Sunni concerns about Iranian influence continue to fuel debate over the expansion of Shiism in Sunni-majority countries.

Iran Proxies

Iran employs its proxies throughout the Middle East, Central Asia, and South America to extend its influence and disseminate its ideology. According to Nathaniel F. Manni in a paper for Norwich University, Iran's financial, material, and logistical support for militant groups directly impacts international peace efforts, threatens economic stability in the Gulf, and undermines democratic growth. A 2010 U.S. Department of State report described Iran as "the most active sponsor of state terrorism," emphasizing its role in supporting these groups.

The Badr Organization, previously known as the Badr Brigades, exemplifies Iran's proxy strategy. Originally headquartered in Iran for 20 years, the group fought alongside Iranian forces during the Iran-Iraq War. During the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, Badr fighters were accused of working for Iran while also engaging British troops. Later, they collaborated with the Pentagon to target Sunni insurgents.

Iran's Relationship with Al-Qaeda

Although Al-Qaeda is a Sunni organization, its ties to Iran have long been shrouded in secrecy. Recent evidence sheds light on this complex relationship. The Brookings Institution Article *Unlikely Alliance: Iran's Secretive Relationship with Al Qaeda* references the *9/11 Commission Report*, which suggests that Iran and Al-Qaeda cooperated in the early 1990s when Al-Qaeda leaders were based in Sudan. Writings from Saif Al-Adel, a senior Al-Qaeda leader wanted for the 1998 U.S. embassy bombings in Tanzania and Kenya, further document Iran's support for Al-Qaeda leading up to 2001. However, these relations were not without tension, particularly regarding Osama bin Laden.

In October 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department identified an Iran-based Al-Qaeda network, designating Adel Radi Saqr Al Wahabi Al Harbi as a key operative working under Muhsin Al Fadhli. According to U.S. Under-Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David S. Cohen, Iran facilitates the movement of Al-Qaeda fighters and funds through its territory, supporting operations in South Asia and Syria.

A *Council on Foreign Relations* article suggests that Iran has provided refuge to Al-Qaeda members, including facilitating the escape of key figures from Afghanistan and allowing an "Al-Qaeda Management Council" to operate within its borders. The case of Bin Laden's son-in-law, Sulaiman Abu Ghaith—who lived in Iran from 2001 until his 2013 arrest in the U.S.—raises further questions about the extent of Iran's cooperation with the group.

Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood

Iran's relations with the Muslim Brotherhood trace back to the Brotherhood's founder, Hassan al-Banna, who advocated Sunni-Shiite unity against common enemies. Ayatollah Khomeini also supported this idea, and the two were linked through Iranian scholar Nawab Safawi. Sayyid Qutb, a key Brotherhood ideologue and an intellectual predecessor to Al-Qaeda, had his works translated into Persian by Ayatollah Khamenei, further demonstrating the Brotherhood's influence on Iranian Islamist thought.

Although Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri publicly criticized Iran, his actions suggested a different reality. After 9/11, he sent family members to Iran for protection, mirroring arrangements made by Bin Laden. According to *The Looming Tower* by Lawrence Wright, Zawahiri had longstanding ties with Iran, even receiving Iranian training and financial support in 1990 for an attempted coup in Egypt.

Iran's use of proxies extends beyond Al-Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood to include well-established militant groups such as Hezbollah, established in 1982 by Lebanese Shiite clerics loyal to Iran's Vilayat e-Faqih ideology, Hezbollah receives substantial Iranian financial and military support. The group has carried out bombings, kidnappings, and assassinations while expanding its political influence in Lebanon. In 2006, it ignited a war with Israel, resulting in heavy casualties and destruction. Hezbollah also plays a critical role in Syria, fighting alongside Iranian forces to support the Assad regime.

Supporting Al-Assad in Syria

Iran's Revolutionary Guards collaborated with Hezbollah fighters in Syria to support the Al-Assad regime, reportedly establishing camps near the regime's chemical weapons warehouses. Additionally, Shiite Iraqis have gradually joined the fight, standing alongside Iranian and Hezbollah forces. While Al-Assad has been Iran's closest ally in the Middle East, Tehran has hedged its bets by entrenching itself in Syria alongside Hezbollah, preparing for the possibility of the regime's collapse. Hezbollah, in particular, was deeply invested in supporting Assad, as his downfall—an event that occurred in December 2024—would sever its critical weapons supply routes.

Lebanon's Sunni leaders reacted with outrage to Hezbollah's involvement in Syria, calling for jihad against the Shia movement. As journalist Jamie Dettmer reported for Voice of America, Lebanese military commanders had been working "firmly, determinedly, and patiently" to prevent Lebanon from becoming a battlefield for regional conflicts and to contain the spillover from Syria. Recognizing the potential for escalation, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah warned rival Sunni factions against provoking his movement. "Don't miscalculate with us," he cautioned on February 27, 2013, addressing those seeking to incite sectarian violence.

What began as a movement for political pluralism in Syria quickly spiraled into a protracted conflict that has lasted for over a decade. As of March 2021, estimates suggest that more than 617,000 civilians had been killed, including approximately 110,000 in 2014 alone. The humanitarian crisis remains severe. According to a UNHCR report published in March 2025, Syria continues to experience one of the world's worst refugee crises, with over 14 million people displaced since 2011. Within Syria, 7.4 million remain internally displaced, 70% of the population depends on humanitarian aid, and 90% lives in poverty. More than 6 million Syrian refugees have sought shelter in neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, as well as in other parts of the world.

Hundreds of thousands of Syrians continue to endure dire conditions in refugee camps across the region. The Assad regime's military operations have devastated cities, destroyed homes, and obliterated historical landmarks, leaving large swathes of the country without access to food, fuel, or medicine—one of the worst humanitarian disasters in the region's history. Despite this, the United States and its Western allies have been reluctant to intervene decisively in favor of the opposition. The Obama administration refrained from providing military support to opposition forces, even against the advice of the president's own military advisors. Instead, the U.S. went as far as designating one of the opposition's most formidable Sunni militias, the Al-Nusra Front, as a terrorist organization—alienating many anti-regime Syrians, even those unaffiliated with Nusra, and contributing to the radicalization of Syrian youth.

While Western nations have vocally condemned the atrocities committed by the Syrian regime—holding 'Friends of the Syrian People' conferences, pushing for UN Security Council resolutions against Assad, and offering humanitarian aid to refugees—their actions have largely fallen short. When it comes to taking concrete steps, they have consistently hesitated, failing to translate rhetoric into meaningful intervention.

Iran's Complicated Relations with Egypt

Iran has actively sought to improve ties with Egypt, especially after the election of President Mohamed Morsi of the Muslim Brotherhood. Iranian leaders, including President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, engaged in diplomatic visits to Cairo, hoping to establish a new axis of influence. However, Al-Azhar's Grand Imam, Ahmed Al-Tayeb, opposed closer ties, demanding better treatment for Sunnis and Al-Ahwazi Arabs in Iran, non-interference in Bahrain, and an end to Shiite proselytization in Sunni-majority countries.

Iranian efforts also faced resistance from Salafist groups, which feared an Iranian push to spread Shiism in Egypt. Anti-Iran protests erupted in Cairo, and Morsi hesitated to fully embrace Iran, wary of straining relations with Gulf states, particularly the UAE. While the Muslim Brotherhood shared some ideological commonalities with Iran, their opposing stances on Syria—where the Brotherhood supported Assad's ouster while Iran backed his regime—further complicated their relationship.

Is Iran a Threat to Gulf States?

While GCC member states are wary that their near neighbor Iran may pose a very real threat, they fail to agree on the best way of addressing it, says *Al Hayat's* Senior Diplomatic Correspondent Raghida Dergham. Some GCC states, including the UAE—one of Iran's biggest trading partners—favor good relations and dialogue as a means to stave off Iranian interference, while others believe Iran should be confronted. Shiite uprisings in Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia are cited as examples of Iranian provocation. Iran has made territorial claims on Bahrain, which, judging from *Wikileaks* cables, fears Iranian missiles sighted on downtown Manama and royal palaces. In 2011, Iran announced it had no intention of returning UAE islands, stating that Abu Musa and the Tunbs "will remain ours forever."

Dergham refers to Iranian nationalistic commentators who argue that the UAE itself lacks international legitimacy and should belong to Iran. Among their claims is the assertion that, "The UAE didn't exist up to 40 years ago! The entire country was part of Iran." On the "Iran Defence" website, a map of "Greater Iran" includes the Musandam Peninsula and Bahrain. In 2012, Iran warned the UAE that it would consider severing relations with Abu Dhabi if it persisted in demanding the return of UAE islands. That same year, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad made a provocative visit to Abu Musa, which was condemned by the GCC.

Tehran has repeatedly issued threats to Gulf security, including warnings that it could close the Strait of Hormuz to shipping, set fire to Gulf oilfields, and bomb Western interests in the region if it were to come under attack. Iran has also pressured airlines to use the term "Persian Gulf" instead of "Arabian Gulf," threatening to revoke landing rights from those that refuse.

In response to these threats and the potential for a future U.S.-Iran rapprochement, Gulf states would be advised to seek self-reliance through a federation defended by a powerful joint military capable of securing the GCC's borders.

Questions to be Addressed

1. Have the US and its Western allies historically maintained control over the Middle East and the Gulf by fomenting religious and ethnic divisions, and are they continuing with this policy today?
2. Are the CIA and MI6 partly or wholly responsible for the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Al Qaeda which have all cooperated together at one time or another?
3. In May, 1916, France and Britain (with the assent of Russia) signed a secret agreement, the Sykes-Picot agreement, which redrew the Arab world's borders and changed its future. The Middle East was divided up into sectarian entities with populations adhering to multiple faiths and sects. Did this guarantee the potential for internal explosions at any time at the minimum push, to suit the imperialist powers' divide and rule goals?
4. Has the US been systematically working to break-up strong Sunni States in the favour of Israel and Iran?
5. Is American/Israeli and Iranian enmity largely for public consumption to control populations with fear-mongering?
6. Can it be confirmed that the Islamic Republic and the US have worked together in Afghanistan and Iraq and enjoy contacts via backchannels through the Swiss and through secrete joint committee meetings held in Geneva?
7. Are Israel and Iran covertly aligned against Sunni states and do they conduct trade through Mossad front companies? Ex Mossad heads have come out publicly to warn that attacking Iran's nuclear sites is 'madness'.
8. Are Western powers and Israel planning an eventual public accommodation with Iran when the time is right to the detriment of Arab Sunni states? Does Washington view it in its interests to appoint a powerful homogenous entity like Iran as its proxy regional caretaker as the Shah once was? Is the US currently engaged in throwing Sunni states under a bus?
9. Are Gulf States under real and looming threats from Iranian territorial ambitions and its spread of Shiite ideology – and also from Muslim Brotherhood cells stirring up dissent against Gulf rulers?
10. Is Iran's age-old hatred of Sunnis playing out inside Iran and Iraq with discrimination against Sunni populations? Does Tehran back Shiite populations in Lebanon and Syria to the detriment of Sunnis? Is it igniting unrest in Bahrain and eastern Saudi Arabia and dispatching agents to predominantly Sunni countries such as Egypt and Algeria to attract Shiite converts?

Recommendations

Much of the Arab world is disintegrating, enmeshed in violence, instability and burgeoning poverty. Considered allies of Washington, their trust in the US to protect them against Iran is misplaced. Economic, political, military, self-reliance and intelligence-sharing in the form of a strong, well-armed Saudi/Gulf federation is an urgent requirement. The overall situation is confused but Gulf leaderships would be advised to see the big picture before it's too late.

Acknowledge the Deeply Volatile Regional Landscape: The Arab world continues to be fractured by prolonged and complex conflicts. The devastating situation in Syria persists, with ongoing humanitarian crises and the involvement of multiple international actors. Yemen remains embroiled in a protracted civil war with significant regional implications. Libya struggles with internal divisions and the presence of competing authorities and militias. Sudan is facing a severe internal conflict with immense human suffering. Adding to this is the deeply concerning and recently intensified Israeli-Palestinian conflict, particularly the situation in Gaza, which resonates strongly across the region, including in Egypt, and has the potential to further destabilize the broader Middle East. This environment necessitates a proactive and unified approach from the GCC.

Recognize the GCC's Pivotal Strategic Position: Saudi Arabia and the GCC member states hold significant economic power due to their vast energy resources, playing a crucial role in global energy markets. They also represent a substantial segment of the Sunni Islamic world, wielding considerable religious and cultural influence. Their stability and cohesion are vital not only for their own well-being but also for the wider region and the global economy.

Address the Evolving Perception of US Protection: The traditional reliance on the United States for security guarantees in the Middle East is being viewed with increasing uncertainty. Events such as the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, the fluctuating approach to the Iranian nuclear deal, and the perceived hesitancy in robustly responding to certain regional crises have led to questions about the consistency and reliability of US commitments. This necessitates the GCC taking greater ownership of its collective security.

Prioritize Urgent and Decisive Self-Reliance: Given the fluid and unpredictable nature of the region, marked by both state and non-state actors vying for influence, the GCC cannot afford to delay in strengthening its own capabilities. Procrastination could lead to missed opportunities for consolidation and leave the region more vulnerable to external pressures and internal strife.

Enhance Comprehensive Economic Integration: Beyond the existing framework, the GCC should pursue deeper economic integration through initiatives such as a full customs union, a common market, and the encouragement of joint ventures in diverse sectors beyond hydrocarbons, including technology, tourism, and renewable energy. Establishing joint investment funds and streamlining regulations can further foster economic resilience and interdependence.

Forge Unified and Resolute Political Stances: The GCC needs to present a united front on critical regional issues, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the approach to relations with Iran, and responses to internal and external threats within the Arab world. This requires consistent dialogue, compromise, and a commitment to collective decision-making to project a strong and coherent voice on the international stage.

Deepen and Integrate Military Capabilities: Moving beyond individual national armies, the GCC should work towards greater military interoperability through joint training exercises, the standardization of military equipment where feasible, and the establishment of joint command structures for specific scenarios. Exploring collaborative defense procurement strategies can also enhance their collective strength and reduce dependence on external powers for essential military hardware.

Strengthen Robust and Seamless Intelligence Sharing: Effective intelligence sharing is paramount in countering the complex and evolving threats facing the region, including terrorism, cyberattacks, and foreign interference. Establishing a centralized intelligence fusion center and fostering trust and collaboration among national intelligence agencies are crucial steps in this direction.

Recognize and Address the Multifaceted Threat from Iran: Iran's nuclear program, its development of ballistic missiles, and its active support for proxy groups in countries like Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen pose significant security challenges to the GCC. A unified GCC strategy is needed to address these threats through a combination of diplomatic engagement, where possible, robust defense capabilities, and close coordination with international partners.

Form a Strong and Cohesive Saudi/Gulf Federation: While achieving a full federation may be a long-term goal, the GCC should explore closer forms of union that enhance collective security and political leverage. This could involve greater coordination on foreign policy, defense, and internal security, potentially leading to shared institutions and a stronger, more unified voice in regional and international affairs.

Act Decisively and with a Sense of Urgency: The current geopolitical landscape demands swift and decisive action from GCC leaders. Delays in implementing these recommendations could have significant and potentially detrimental consequences for the stability and security of the region.

Maintain a Strategic and Enduring Long-Term Vision: The GCC needs to develop a long-term strategic vision that transcends immediate crises and focuses on building a stable, prosperous, and secure future for generations to come. This includes investing in education, diversifying economies, and fostering inclusive governance structures that address the needs and aspirations of their populations.

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