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The Iran-Israel Conflict: Geopolitical Implications for The Middle East

By Huzeir Ezekiel Dzulhisham

SYNOPSIS

The Iran-Israel conflict will affect the Middle East in three ways. First, it will setback the normalisation of Israel's relations with countries in the region. Second, Israel's military power, as demonstrated in its war with Iran, could intensify the military buildup in these countries as they seek to balance Israel's military might. Third, a weakened Iran could lead to a vacuum of influence in the Levant, and allow Israel, Turkey and the Gulf states to expand their influence, which could intensify existing tensions in the region.

COMMENTARY

Since June 13, Israel and Iran have attacked each other with missile and drone strikes. While both had exchanged fire in 2024, the present conflict is significant because of the magnitude of Iranian losses at [elite levels](#), including military generals and nuclear scientists, with more than [100 strikes](#) on Tehran. The US supported Israel and [bombed](#) Iranian nuclear sites in Fordow, Isfahan, and Natanz. While these attacks served to cripple Iran's military and nuclear capabilities, the magnitude of Iran's retaliatory attacks [against](#) Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Haifa, as well as the US base in [Al Udeid](#), Qatar, demonstrated Tehran's operational resilience. Given this recent 12-day war, what are the prospects for Israeli normalisation? Will the conflict change the Middle East's balance of power?

The Setback to Israel's Diplomatic Normalisation

Israel's attacks on Iran and its ongoing war in Gaza reinforce perceptions in the Middle East that Israeli military campaigns [threaten](#) regional stability. Although the latest 2023-2024 Arab Barometer survey results indicate that support for Iran is [weak](#) among Middle East and North African (MENA) countries, they also show that support for

normalisation of relations with Israel is comparatively lower in these countries, [reaching](#) at most 13 per cent. These public perceptions could constrain the MENA governments in their efforts to justify diplomatic normalisation with Israel.

In Jordan and Morocco, two of the five MENA states that have diplomatic relations with Israel, there has been a [public outcry](#) over the ties as a result of the war in Gaza. In November 2023, Jordan [withdrew](#) its ambassador to Israel following public protests. The Moroccan government also faced public pressure, experiencing mass [protests](#) against diplomatic relations with Israel.

The concern for these governments is the possibility of opposition groups catalysing mass opposition. In Morocco, the opposition movement [Al Adl wal Ihsan](#) helped to organise demonstrations. In Jordan, there is concern that religion-based anger over ties with Israel could [evolve](#) into anti-government movements, which was why the Muslim Brotherhood [was banned](#) in May 2025.

The Israeli strikes on Iran provide a secondary focal point, supporting public perceptions that Israel's military campaigns, deemed excessive, are destabilising the region. This explains why some of the MENA governments have strongly condemned Israel in the aftermath of its attacks on Iran. Jordan's King Abdullah II's [speech](#) to the European Parliament warned that Israel's attacks were "a threat to people everywhere" and emphasised the dangers of regional escalation.

Saudi Arabia [issued](#) "strong condemnation and denunciation of the blatant Israeli aggressions against the brotherly Islamic Republic of Iran". Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, in a [phone call](#) to Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, condemned the Israeli attacks as "violating international law" and expressed his condolences to the Iranian people. Statements like this imply that prospects for diplomatic normalisation with Israel have been dampened.

Balancing Israel

It is reasonable to conclude that Israel's demonstration of its military prowess could cause MENA states to feel insecure as Israel could choose to use coercion against them to achieve its geopolitical objectives. Two factors could further heighten Israel's securitisation. First, the dominating [influence](#) of far-right politicians in the Israeli government, who advocate for a Greater Israel and the creation of an Israeli sphere of influence. Second, the United States' regime change agenda that it set for Iran as implied by [US President Donald Trump's call](#) for Iran's "unconditional surrender", which echoed US calls preceding its invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The Israel-Iran conflict could precipitate an arms buildup in the Gulf states and Turkey to balance Israel's strength. On June 18, Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan announced [proposals](#) to increase the domestic production of warplanes, tanks, drones and frigates, and to make Turkey's armed forces "fully independent" of external sources. Turkish concerns are encapsulated in a [statement](#) by nationalist politician, Devlet Bahçeli, that Israel's "operation carried out in Iran is, in a way, a sinister message given to Turkey", reinforcing Turkey's already strained relations with Israel.

A military buildup by Turkey, which has the [most capable](#) industrial defence base in

the region, could bolster a regional buildup. Even before the current Israel-Iran war, the Gulf states had increased their cooperation with Turkey and amongst themselves to create self-reliant defence industries.

In January 2025, Saudi Arabia signed a US\$6 billion defence [agreement](#) with Turkey that includes Turkish Altay battle tanks, unmanned aerial vehicles and potential collaboration on KAAN stealth fighter jets. The UAE signed a US\$2.45 billion [deal](#) with Kuwait to supply eight FALAJ-3 class missile boats. Insecurity caused by Israel's military strength and the uncertain trajectory of the latter's territorial ambitions could bring about more military deals.

Vacuum in The Levant

A weakened Iran creates a vacuum of influence in Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, which could become the new sites of regional tension. For years, Iran exerted regional influence using its allies in the Axis of Resistance, i.e., militias such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, the Popular Mobilisation Forces in Iraq, and the Assad regime in Syria. Part of Iran's sphere of influence, they were launchpads for attacks on Israel and targets in the Gulf region – an aspect of Iran's [forward defence](#) strategy, which kept conflicts at a distance while enabling it to exert influence through proxies.

The weakening of Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas as a result of the Israeli attacks and the Assad regime's collapse in December 2024 significantly undermined Iranian influence in the Levant. While creating a power vacuum that allowed Israel, the Gulf states and Turkey opportunities to expand their influence, it also saw increasing competition between them, as each has its own vested interests.

Israel's interests include the creation of buffer zones around its borders to prevent a repeat of October 7-like attacks, which explains why it seeks a permanent [military presence](#) in Southern Lebanon and Southern Syria to protect its northern borders.

For Turkey, control over Northern Syria and Iraq creates buffers against Islamic State (IS) terrorists and [Kurdish insurgents](#) that use the Kurdish Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria as a base. In May 2025, the Turkish military [announced](#) the establishment of air, naval and ground force bases in Syria to combat IS.

In contrast, the Gulf states are pursuing financial leverage over the Levant to bind the region to their interests. Consolidated influence in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq could provide greater security from the remnants of Hezbollah, Hamas and IS, and combat [drug syndicates](#) that smuggle captagon, an addictive amphetamine that plagues the Gulf. This also explains why Saudi Arabia and Qatar have [repaid](#) Syria's World Bank debts, while also committing [greater](#) economic investments to Lebanon and [Iraq](#). The United Arab Emirates (UAE) signed a [US\\$800 million](#) deal to develop Syria's Tartus Port.

As expected, overlapping zones of interest raise tensions and increase the risk of conflict. Not surprisingly, in April 2025, Israel [bombed](#) three vacant Syrian bases that Turkish forces had planned to use, besides accusing Turkey of aiming to establish a "[Turkish protectorate](#)".

The competition for influence in the Levant could exacerbate existing [tensions](#) between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, both of which backed opposing groups in the Yemeni and Sudanese civil wars. It could also deepen the fault line between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, given the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar in 2017.

An Uncertain Future

While the weakening of Iran following its recent war with Israel and the United States has transformed the Middle East's power dynamics, it should also be apparent that this will not resolve regional tensions and could lead to new challenges that could precipitate further conflicts.

The situation will become more complicated if Iran manages to recover from the war and acquire nuclear weapons to deter future attacks by Israel and the US. This would intensify the precarious and evolving military balance between Israel and Iran, and the competition for influence in the Levant, as Iran seeks to reclaim its lost influence.

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