

Navigating Digital Frontiers and Geopolitical Currents: A Descriptive Analytical Review of U.S.–Iran Relations and Middle Eastern Dynamics

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The contemporary geopolitical landscape of the Middle East is characterized by profound turbulence and a rapid acceleration in technological advancements. The world is entering a volatile phase: U.S. power is eroding, polarization at home is growing, and rivals are pressing their advantage. In the Middle East, Iran and its neighbors blend old drivers of politics—oil, alliances, ideology—with new tools like cyber operations, digital networks, and globalized economic ties.

This article offers a consolidated review of scholarly and policy-oriented literature on U.S.-Iran relations, the influence of Washington-based think tanks in shaping foreign policy agendas, the challenges of energy security, the political economy of the Gulf and North Africa, and the elevation of cybersecurity as a core domain of strategic rivalry. The aim is to show the key factors that shape political decisions, change power relations, and influence regional security.

Shifting Hegemony and the Multipolar Order: The Revival of Old Alliances

At the start of the twenty-first century, the United States enjoyed a level of global influence that was unparalleled

since the end of the Cold War. However, by the mid-2020s, there had been an increasing contestation of this supremacy. Washington allocates a big part of its budget to defence; however, its capacity to influence regional dynamics appears to have decreased. As Dehnavi notes, “American hegemony seems to be on the decline and the international system is gradually including the transition from west to east ... the US is gradually losing its monopoly over key industries and has been heavily indebted to Asia, and especially China” (“*The Reasons for the Decline of American Hegemony and its Impact on China's Regional Policies in the Middle East*” pp. 105–106).

The return of Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 and his decision to reinstate the maximum-pressure campaign against Iran are perhaps indicative of the unpredictability of American policy and its reliance on coercive tools. These measures led to an escalation in tensions, resulting in U.S. strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities and missile attacks against American bases in Qatar in response. Despite the subsequent ceasefire, the episode highlighted the rapid involvement of major powers in regional crises and the significant shift in the United States' approach to multilateral diplomacy.

In an effort to address the ongoing challenges, China has proposed a series of initiatives, including the Belt and Road Initiative and a five-point plan to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). At the same time, Beijing has deepened its economic ties with the Gulf monarchies, thereby combining economic statecraft with diplomatic initiatives. Chinese investment serves not only as a mechanism for strengthening regional interdependence but also as a tool to project China's vision of a multipolar landscape.

Meanwhile, Russia has reasserted its presence in areas such as Syria and Ukraine and now champions Iran's right to civil nuclear technology. Moscow has been known to play a mediating role in regional conflicts, while also offering to sell arms to the parties involved, with the aim of strengthening its position. It seems that Russia is keen to emphasise its role as an important player in shaping the regional order, while also posing a challenge to Western influence.

In the spirit of constructive engagement, we must acknowledge the strategic responses of the Gulf monarchies to complex external competition. In this regard, there has been a notable diversification of partnerships, which underscores a commitment to promoting diverse and inclusive relationships. They are thought to be actively courting Chinese investment and expanding their purchases of Russian arms, while at the same time maintaining longstanding security arrangements with Washington. This multi-vector policy is intended to reflect an effort to preserve autonomy in foreign policy decision-making and to find a balance between external powers amid a contested international environment.

Ideological Think Tanks, Domestic Polarization, and U.S. Foreign Policy

In the contemporary United States, there appears to be an emerging trend of foreign policy being influenced to a greater extent by ideologically oriented think tanks than by the traditional bipartisan consensus. Institutions such as the Heritage Foundation, representing the conservative political spectrum, and the Center for American Progress, representing the progressive wing, offer ready-made policy models that largely reflect the interests of their donors and supporters. This reliance on private expertise may, in certain instances, contribute to a degree of political polarisation, and it could be perceived that the influence of career civil servants on strategic decision-making may be somewhat diminished.

Similar dynamics are observed in the economic sphere. It is fair to say that conservative think tanks have consistently advocated for deregulation and market mechanisms. Meanwhile, their progressive opponents have emphasised the need for social investment and a stronger role for the state. At the same time, both positions demonstrate contradictions in a crisis, as parties, regardless of ideological rhetoric, resort to large-scale federal intervention. The result is a kind of hybrid approach that fails to ensure systemic renewal of outdated infrastructure and fails to address underlying social problems.

The so-called Trump Doctrine, analysed in *Waking Up from an American Dream*, is a particularly illustrative example of this transformation. Its ideological basis could be said to be linked to the tradition of Jacksonian nationalism, and it

combines protectionist trade policies, strict immigration controls, and unilateral security steps. This course is one that voters concerned about the effects of globalisation and demographic change may find appealing, but it could also perhaps weaken multilateral cooperation and complicate relations with allies. The US's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA and the re-imposition of sanctions have had consequences for the credibility of US commitments, which may be a factor in the outlook for further negotiations.

Therefore, when domestic political narratives inform foreign policy, it can be seen that there is a risk involved in compromising with potential adversaries. Dehnavi (*The Trump Doctrine: Redefining U.S. Foreign Policy through Immigration, Security, and Diplomacy* p.27 *Coercive Diplomacy and Military Intervention*) points out that diplomatic pragmatism is increasingly being replaced by cyclical escalation, which may have negative consequences for the stability of the international system and the position of the United States itself.

Proxy Warfare and Nuclear Diplomacy: Structural Challenges in Iran's Regional and Domestic Policy

Iran has decided to play a bit of a behind-the-scenes game, mainly by backing up proxy groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This means that Tehran can act beyond its own borders and influence conflicts in the region, avoiding direct responsibility for attacks on Israeli or American targets. This tactic provides Iran with some protection, as it allows it to deny involvement while achieving its own goals. For Israel and the Gulf monarchies, this is a serious destabilization issue. These actions are making things worse by creating more division between different groups, and making wars last longer. They also make it worse for ordinary people. But at the same time, Iran's reliance on these forces highlights its weaknesses. Years of sanctions, political isolation, and a lack of army modernization have made open confrontation too costly and risky.

It is clear that negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme are taking place in this context. In 2025, Oman tried to mediate in indirect talks between Tehran and Washington to restore some provisions of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

Action. Leaked information confirms that the United States was ready to agree to a limited level of uranium enrichment and the export of Iranian stockpiles abroad. However, Iran insisted on recognizing its right to a full nuclear fuel cycle and demanded a large-scale lifting of sanctions. The political environment in both countries made compromise much more difficult: American diplomats encountered clear opposition from Congress, while Iranian conservatives outright refused to accept any concessions.

Trust was further undermined by Israel's clandestine military actions and reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) highlighting Iran's non-compliance with its international obligations. Consequently, the prospect of reaching even partial agreements was rendered unattainable.

Domestically, Iran is also experiencing serious difficulties. Poor economic management and ongoing political repression are forcing many educated Iranians to seek opportunities elsewhere. Scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs are looking for opportunities abroad, and the country is losing its human capital. This brain drain is detrimental to both economic development and Iran's position in relation to its neighbours, whose economies are more diverse and integrated into the global system. The country's leadership is therefore faced with a challenging decision: whether to maintain ideological rigidity, potentially at the expense of losing individuals whose knowledge and experience are vital for future development.

Globalization, Economic Diversification, and Political Stability in the Gulf Monarchies

The Gulf monarchies have wholeheartedly embraced globalisation for economic development, while maintaining authoritarian political models. A comparison of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) proves that economic liberalisation and political continuity can indeed coexist.

The UAE has a unique demographic situation: out of about nine million inhabitants, only about one million are nationals. This imbalance is a key factor in weakening public pressure for political reform. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand,

continues to operate a patrimonial social contract. Under this system, the government provides the population with oil revenues and social benefits in exchange for political loyalty. In both countries, it is clear that the legitimacy of the regimes is largely based on economic performance rather than democratic participation.

There are different ways to make the economy more varied. The UAE has created free economic zones, attracted multinationals and invested in aviation, tourism and finance. This means that their economy is less dependent on money made from oil, and the Emirates are trying to become an important place where Europe, Asia and Africa can do business. As part of its Vision 2030 programme, Saudi Arabia is trying to reduce its dependence on oil by implementing large-scale projects and developing the entertainment, mining and high technology industries. But progress in these areas is still largely limited by money from oil.

In foreign policy, both states are working closely with the United States, but also want to attract investments from China and Russia to protect themselves from the unpredictability of American policy. Riyadh and Abu Dhabi sometimes have disagreements about monetary union, where the border is between them, or who has the biggest share of the market. At the same time, common challenges such as regional instability, the spread of extremism, and Iranian influence are driving their cooperation within the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Cyberspace and Power: Security Challenges in the Gulf and North Africa

In recent years, cyberspace has emerged as a significant dimension of political processes in the Middle East. Research conducted on the Gulf and North Africa region has identified phishing, denial-of-service attacks, man-in-the-middle, exploitation of zero-day vulnerabilities and the use of hidden backdoors as the most prevalent forms of cyberattacks. The gravity of this situation is mounting: approximately one-third of organisations in the region have already been subjected to cybercrime, and in the United Arab Emirates, more than 75% of internet users have reported having experienced cyber incidents, resulting in losses amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars. Institutions in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman

face similar challenges. In North Africa, the proportion of cyberattacks perpetrated via mobile devices has increased significantly, reaching more than a fifth of all attacks. This phenomenon can be attributed to the widespread use of smartphones and the absence of effective regulatory frameworks. Consequently, the vulnerability of workers to cyber threats undermines efforts to develop digital economies.

The correlation between cyber risks and economic diversification is well-documented. The Gulf states have identified smart city projects, digital financial services and the Internet of Things as pivotal instruments in their post-oil development strategies. Concurrently, the implementation of these initiatives results in an augmentation of the 'attack surface'. Despite the Gulf Cooperation Council's strategic emphasis on enhancing cyber resilience, a significant proportion of the region's workforce continues to utilise personal devices for professional purposes, thereby introducing additional risks. As Aghili and Fiedler point out in “Cyber Security as a New Strategic Issue in the Middle East: A Case Study of Persian Gulf and North African Countries” cybersecurity represents not only a technical challenge but also a political necessity.

The decision of regional governments to adopt a more proactive stance was influenced by three major developments. Firstly, during the 2011 events known as the Islamic Awakening, social media and digital platforms played an unprecedented role in mobilising protests, thereby demonstrating the considerable political potential of online networks. Secondly, the detection of the Stuxnet virus, which infected Iranian nuclear facilities and, according to many estimates, was the result of US-Israeli cooperation, demonstrated the possibility of using cyber tools to destroy critical infrastructure. Thirdly, escalating tensions between the United States and Iran have prompted Washington to enhance collaboration with the Gulf monarchies in the domain of cyber defence, encompassing intelligence sharing and joint institutional capacity building. This has resulted in the formulation of national cyber strategies, the adoption of relevant legislation, and substantial investments in digital control infrastructure.

In response to the Stuxnet attack, Iran constructed a substantial cyber complex, incorporating offensive capabilities into its national security infrastructure. Its

operations against both foreign infrastructure and domestic opposition groups have become an element of asymmetric deterrence. In response to these developments, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain have initiated their own cyber defence programmes, while Kuwait has established a substantial partnership with the United Kingdom, valued at over one billion dollars. In North Africa, approaches vary considerably: Tunisia demonstrates a high level of preparedness, Egypt has the most developed legislation in the field of combating cybercrime, while Morocco and Libya lag far behind. Concurrently, external actors assume a substantial role: The People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation are providing surveillance technologies and investing in infrastructure projects, while the United States of America remains the region's primary security partner. The combination of local vulnerabilities and geopolitical competition renders cyberspace governance a crucial factor in regional politics.

From Oil Routes to Digital Frontlines

Even though there are now more renewable energy sources and predictions that there will soon be too much oil, hydrocarbons are still very important in global politics. The fact that the United States and the United Kingdom work together in the Persian Gulf shows that having enough energy is still the main reason for having soldiers and diplomats in the area. Both countries control important sea routes, especially the Strait of Hormuz, and keep ships there to protect tankers. The countries that send oil also have friendly relations with each other. This makes sure that there is always enough oil, and they work together to stop things like piracy and sabotage. This approach is about keeping things steady, even if it means putting pressure on other kingdoms to make changes.

This dimension of security is closely intertwined with the issue of cyber threats, which have become a new instrument of influence in the region. The primary function of naval presence is to protect physical infrastructure and supply routes. In contrast, the cyber strategies employed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Gulf monarchies are intended to counter potential attacks that could paralyse the economy and energy sector without the use of weapons. The confluence of

energy and digital risks engenders a heightened vulnerability and strategic significance of the Persian Gulf within the broader context of global politics.

Energy Security, Cyber Threats, and the Decline of US Hegemony

Achieving a sustainable agreement between the US and Iran is an extremely challenging task, given the number of sensitive dimensions involved, including nuclear, missile, proxy and cyber. Domestic political considerations in both Washington and Tehran serve to hinder the search for compromises. Analysts have identified a step-by-step approach as a potential solution, involving the recognition of Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology, the establishment of clear and verifiable limits on uranium enrichment and missile development, and the exchange of the gradual lifting of sanctions for enhanced transparency. A new element that is increasingly prominent in the discussions is cybersecurity: no agreement would be complete without agreements to prohibit attacks on critical infrastructure, as they can have a significant impact without the use of violence.

“The results indicate that the trend toward US hegemony is declining, citing the need for multilateralism, the US financial crisis, and the emergence of new powers, including China” (p.104 “The Reasons for the Decline of American Hegemony and Its Impact on China’s Regional Policies in the Middle East”)

It is important to note however that any document is inherently vulnerable without regional support. It is submitted that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates could act as guarantors, thereby providing both investment and security in exchange for Iranian restraint. European mediators, conversely, have the resources to reinstate the JCPOA's settlement mechanisms, which could return the process to a legal framework. Should the neighbours choose to adopt a passive stance and fail to reach an internal consensus, any diplomatic initiative is susceptible to failure.

Alongside developments in the Iranian dossier, a broader process is underway: the transformation of the regional power architecture as American hegemony is weakening. The Gulf monarchies are expanding their partnerships by acquiring technology from Chinese corporations, weapons from Russia, and capital from Europe. In the face of mounting sanctions pressure, Iran is strategically deepening its

ties with Moscow and Beijing. Turkey, Qatar, and Oman are attempting to maintain a balanced relationship between the two blocs, while avoiding a definitive alignment. The United States, on the other hand, is oscillating between intervention and a reduced presence, driven by internal polarisation and rivalry between its own security institutions and think tanks.

In this dynamic environment, cyberspace is becoming a dual tool: it intensifies competition as states use it for attacks and espionage, but it also opens up space for cooperation, for example, in preventing massive attacks on energy or finance. Consequently, the new balance of power in the Middle East is being shaped not only in maritime negotiations or through nuclear diplomacy, but also in the digital sphere, where the long-term stability of the region is being decided.

Conclusion

The Middle East's future will be shaped by two key factors: the decline of American hegemony and the rise of new regional and global actors. The weakening of the US position caused by financial crises, domestic political polarisation and strategic overload has reduced its ability to set the agenda alone. This creates space for other players, especially China, which is systematically transforming its economic influence into political influence through expanding trade, investment, and energy agreements with the Gulf states and Iran. The regional order is shifting from unipolarity based on American primacy to multipolar competition.

For the United States, maintaining its influence will depend on overcoming internal contradictions, leveraging the expertise of think tanks, and intensifying multilateral diplomacy that integrates nuclear, ballistic, proxy, and cyber threats. Iran is facing a dual challenge: the need to reconcile its ideological commitments with economic realities, to prevent escalation while maintaining strategic depth, and to retain human capital. In turn, the Gulf monarchies must harness globalisation for economic benefit and technological innovation, while also strengthening political resilience in the face of internal protests and external challenges. Their growing ties with China in energy and technology, as well as with Russia and Europe, indicate a gradual diversification of foreign policy orientations.

At the same time, cyberspace and energy security are becoming key arenas of competition. While cyber threats increase instability through espionage and the risk of attacks on critical infrastructure, they also offer opportunities for cooperation through legal frameworks, joint defence mechanisms and increased public awareness. Energy deals, digital networks and technological interdependence are increasingly shaping regional relations alongside military and ideological factors. In this context, the stability of the Middle East will depend on the ability of states to adapt to the new multipolarity, where China's growing presence is accelerating the transformation of the regional balance of power.

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