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The Logic of Interest Alignment and Regional Coalition-Building in the Persistence of Iran–U.S. Hostility: A Structural Neorealist Analysis of Israel and Saudi Arabia

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The persistence of hostility between Iran and the United States constitutes one of the most enduring patterns of strategic confrontation in the Middle East. This article examines this hostility from a structural neorealist perspective, with particular emphasis on the regional interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia and the role of interest alignment and coalition-building in reinforcing the existing balance of power. The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach and focuses on the interaction between threat perception, relative capabilities, regional balancing, external security partnerships, and strategic competition. The analysis indicates that Iran–U.S. hostility cannot be understood solely as a bilateral dispute, because its continuation produces significant security, political, and economic consequences for other regional actors. Israel perceives Iran's nuclear activities, missile and drone capabilities, and regional networks as major threats to its security and therefore benefits from sustained American attention to constraining Iranian power. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, seeks to preserve a favorable regional balance through continued security cooperation with the United States while simultaneously attempting to reduce the costs of direct confrontation with Iran. Although Israeli and Saudi interests are not identical, their overlapping concerns regarding Iranian regional influence create incentives for parallel balancing and selective strategic convergence. The United States functions as the principal external power through which much of this balancing is organized, while Iran responds through deterrence, regional partnerships, diplomatic diversification, and strategic adaptation. The findings show that this reciprocal process produces a self-reinforcing security dilemma in which balancing by one side generates counterbalancing by the other, thereby contributing to the durability of Iran–U.S. hostility. The article concludes that a sustainable reduction in bilateral confrontation requires not only direct Iran–U.S. engagement but also broader regional mechanisms capable of reducing threat perceptions and limiting incentives for recurrent coalition-building and counterbalancing.

Keywords: *Iran–U.S. Relations; Structural Neorealism; Balance of Power; Regional Coalition-Building; Israel; Saudi Arabia; Strategic Competition*

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1. Introduction

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States have constituted one of the most persistent patterns of confrontation in the contemporary Middle East. Although the roots of tension extend to developments preceding the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the transformation of the political order in Iran fundamentally altered the strategic character of the

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bilateral relationship and gradually converted disagreement between Tehran and Washington into a multidimensional rivalry involving security, military power, regional influence, economic sanctions, nuclear policy, ideological contestation, and competing conceptions of regional order. Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy reduced the strategic compatibility that had previously characterized relations between Tehran and Washington, while the United States increasingly regarded Iranian regional behavior as incompatible with its own security architecture and partnerships in the Middle East. Consequently, periods of tactical accommodation have occurred within a broader framework of strategic distrust. The bilateral relationship has therefore not developed as a continuous sequence of uniformly intense hostility, but neither have occasional negotiations been sufficient to transform its underlying structure. Studies examining the trajectory of Iran–U.S. relations have accordingly identified a combination of ideological disagreements, strategic conflicts, sanctions, regional competition, disputes surrounding Iran's nuclear program, and conflicting understandings of Middle Eastern security as factors reproducing the confrontational relationship (Banihashemi et al., 2022). Futures-oriented research has similarly indicated that the interaction between these variables has repeatedly generated divergent scenarios ranging from negotiated accommodation to renewed escalation, demonstrating that the bilateral relationship is embedded in a broader and highly uncertain regional environment rather than being reducible to a single issue (Tabatabaei & Nourani, 2019). The persistence of this confrontation cannot, however, be explained adequately through a strictly bilateral framework. Iran and the United States operate within a regional system populated by actors whose security calculations, alliances, economic interests, threat perceptions, and strategic partnerships are affected by changes in the intensity of Iran–U.S. relations. From a structural perspective, bilateral hostility produces consequences for the distribution of regional power and therefore creates incentives for other actors to support, oppose, or attempt to modify particular patterns of interaction between Tehran and Washington. This is especially significant in the cases of Israel and Saudi Arabia. Both states have maintained extensive strategic relationships with the United States while simultaneously experiencing prolonged security competition with Iran, although the sources, intensity, and practical manifestations of these rivalries differ substantially. Israel's strategic concerns have concentrated heavily on Iran's nuclear activities, missile capabilities, support for armed non-state actors, and growing capacity to project influence across the Levant and other neighboring arenas. The evolution of Iranian–Israeli competition has increasingly demonstrated how a regional rivalry initially characterized by indirect confrontation can move toward more direct forms of coercive interaction when deterrence mechanisms weaken or when the actors perceive major changes in the regional balance (Pinfold et al., 2025). Research on Israeli strategy toward Iran has also emphasized balancing behavior and the formation of external partnerships as important components of Israel's attempt to address perceived Iranian power and influence (Darini & Nourmohammadi, 2023).

Saudi Arabia approaches Iran from a different geographical, political, and strategic position. The two states are major actors in the Persian Gulf and broader West Asian environment, and their relationship has alternated between competition, confrontation, cautious accommodation, and diplomatic engagement. Their rivalry has involved regional influence, security arrangements, relations with neighboring Arab states, energy interests, and divergent positions toward conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and the Persian Gulf. The concept of the security dilemma is particularly useful in explaining how measures taken by either Tehran or Riyadh for defensive purposes can be interpreted by the other side as evidence of offensive intent, generating reciprocal military and political responses that intensify insecurity even when neither side necessarily seeks unlimited confrontation (Souri, 2022). Saudi Arabia's close defense relationship with the United States has consequently been important not only to Saudi national security but also to the broader regional balance involving Iran. Arms cooperation between Washington and Riyadh can alter Iranian assessments of the regional military balance and affect Iran's security interests, illustrating how U.S.–Saudi strategic interaction becomes embedded within the larger Iran–U.S. confrontation (Khodaei et al., 2022). At the same time, the restoration of diplomatic relations between Tehran and Riyadh through Chinese mediation

in 2023 demonstrated that rivalry does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of selective accommodation and that Saudi foreign policy cannot be understood simply as a permanent extension of U.S. policy toward Iran (Rahimi, 2023).

The cases of Israel and Saudi Arabia thus raise a theoretically significant question concerning the relationship between bilateral hostility and regional coalition formation. A narrow interpretation might assume that the continuation of Iran–U.S. confrontation results exclusively from historical grievances and direct conflicts of interest between Tehran and Washington. Such factors are unquestionably important, but this interpretation leaves insufficient room for understanding the incentives of regional actors whose security and influence are affected by the trajectory of the bilateral relationship. A structural approach instead asks how regional states respond to changes in relative capabilities and whether the persistence of confrontation between two major actors creates strategic opportunities for third parties. From this perspective, the central issue is not whether Israel or Saudi Arabia "causes" Iran–U.S. hostility, because such a monocausal claim would overlook the independent sources of conflict between Tehran and Washington. Rather, the analytical question concerns the mechanisms through which the regional interests of Israel and Saudi Arabia can reinforce, institutionalize, or benefit from an existing structure of confrontation. Israel's security relationship with the United States, for example, gives it incentives to maintain close strategic consultation with Washington concerning Iranian military and nuclear capabilities, while its relations with other regional actors can serve balancing purposes where Iranian influence is perceived as threatening (Shafaghat Niabad & Jafari, 2021). Saudi Arabia, by contrast, combines security dependence on external partnerships with substantial independent resources derived from its geographic location, energy position, financial capabilities, and political influence in Arab and Islamic institutions.

The emergence of partial strategic convergence between Israel and several Arab states has added another dimension to the regional balance. The significance of this development lies not in the assumption that Israel and Saudi Arabia have identical interests, but in the possibility that different actors can cooperate around specific shared concerns while maintaining disagreements in other domains. Structural realism does not require ideological similarity or complete political alignment as a prerequisite for strategic cooperation. Instead, states operating under conditions of uncertainty may coordinate whenever they perceive a common threat to their security or relative position. Iran's expanding regional networks, missile capabilities, nuclear activities, and relations with non-state actors have at various moments generated overlapping Israeli and Saudi concerns even though the two states approach the regional order from different historical and political positions. This strategic convergence has also developed against a background in which Iran itself has sought to adapt to international isolation by deepening relations with Russia, China, and states of the Gulf Cooperation Council where opportunities for pragmatic engagement have emerged (Bazoobandi, 2026). The resulting regional environment is therefore fluid rather than divided into two perfectly coherent blocs.

The U.S. role remains crucial because Washington possesses military, diplomatic, technological, economic, and alliance resources that neither Israel nor Saudi Arabia can replicate independently. American policy toward Iran has consequently affected the incentives available to regional actors. Different U.S. administrations have varied in their preferred instruments, combining sanctions, deterrence, negotiation, diplomatic isolation, military signaling, and attempts to strengthen regional partners. Changes of administration have altered emphasis without necessarily eliminating the structural sources of rivalry. Analyses of U.S. policy toward Iran during the transition to the Biden administration, for example, emphasized the attempt to distinguish diplomatic engagement from the maximum-pressure strategy of the preceding administration while continuing to address nuclear proliferation, regional security, and Iranian influence (Radfar & Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2020). Broader assessments of Biden's Middle East policy likewise identified the tension between reducing direct American military burdens and maintaining established security partnerships and deterrence commitments (Hamidi et al., 2021). These patterns demonstrate that U.S. strategy is shaped simultaneously by bilateral relations with Iran, the expectations of regional allies, the costs of military engagement, energy considerations, nonproliferation objectives, and broader geopolitical competition.

More recent regional developments further illustrate the limitations of viewing Iran solely through the lens of permanent isolation. Iran has attempted to preserve strategic autonomy while simultaneously adapting to shifting international pressures, developing selective partnerships with China and Russia and improving relations with Gulf states where circumstances permit (Bazoobandi, 2026). The restoration of Iran–Saudi diplomatic relations indicates that regional actors can shift from intensive balancing to limited engagement without removing the deeper competitive structure (Keynoush, 2025). Similarly, Iran's approach to neighboring regions reveals a mixture of strategic ambition and defensive concern rather than a uniform expansionist logic. Research concerning Iran's regionalism in the South Caucasus characterizes Tehran as a state concerned with preserving favorable geopolitical arrangements and limiting developments perceived as threatening to its security, while external pressure and tensions with Western powers constrain its regional options (Golmohammadi & Azizi, 2025). These observations make it necessary to distinguish between Iranian capabilities, Iranian intentions as perceived by other states, and the interpretations through which those capabilities are translated into threat perceptions. Accordingly, the objective of this article is to explain the logic through which the alignment of Israeli and Saudi interests and the formation of regional balancing relationships contribute to the persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility within the framework of structural neorealism. The analysis treats the confrontation not as the mechanical product of third-party intervention but as a regional security structure in which the interests of Iran, the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia intersect. The article focuses specifically on the relationship between perceived threats, relative power, regional balancing, strategic partnerships, and coalition-building. By concentrating on these variables, it excludes historical and descriptive material that does not directly contribute to explaining the mechanisms connecting the regional balance of power to the persistence of Iran–U.S. confrontation.

2. Structural Neorealism and the Logic of Regional Interest Alignment

Structural neorealism provides an appropriate analytical framework for examining the persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility because it shifts attention from the personal characteristics of leaders and the internal ideology of individual governments toward the constraints and incentives generated by the distribution of power in an anarchic international system. States operate without a central authority capable of guaranteeing their security, and survival consequently requires continuous attention to capabilities, threats, alliances, and changes in the relative position of other actors. Under these conditions, uncertainty becomes a permanent component of international politics. Even when one state describes its policies as defensive, other states cannot be certain about its future intentions, particularly when those policies produce military capabilities that could later be used offensively. The resulting security dilemma is especially significant in regions characterized by weak collective-security mechanisms, unresolved conflicts, external intervention, and competing regional powers. The Iran–Saudi relationship demonstrates this pattern because actions designed by one side to strengthen deterrence can lead the other to increase its own military capabilities or deepen external security partnerships, thereby reproducing insecurity rather than eliminating it (Souri, 2022). Similar dynamics are observable in Iran–Israel relations, where both sides have developed strategies intended to prevent unacceptable changes in the regional security environment.

A structural-neorealist interpretation distinguishes power from intention. Intentions can change more rapidly than material capabilities, and governments cannot guarantee that the preferences of other states will remain stable over time. Consequently, actors assess not merely current statements but the potential effects of another state's resources, geographic position, military capabilities, strategic partnerships, and access to advanced technologies. Iran occupies a strategically important position connecting the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the broader Middle East. Its population, territory, energy resources, armed forces, missile program, political networks, and relations with regional non-state actors provide sources of regional influence. Yet Iran also confronts significant constraints, including economic sanctions, technological restrictions, international political pressure, and the presence of U.S. forces and partners around its wider strategic environment. Contemporary assessments of Iranian foreign policy therefore describe a mixture of strategic

resistance and pragmatic adaptation, particularly in relations with China, Russia, and the Gulf states (Bazoobandi, 2026). This combination is important because structural realism does not require a state to choose permanently between confrontation and cooperation; it predicts adaptation to changes in the external distribution of opportunities and constraints.

National interest in this framework is closely associated with preserving security and maintaining or improving relative position. States seek economic prosperity and political influence, but these objectives operate within an environment in which a major deterioration in relative power can create long-term vulnerability. Relative gains are therefore significant. Two states may both benefit from a particular arrangement, yet one may remain concerned if the arrangement disproportionately strengthens the other and subsequently alters the strategic balance. This logic is highly relevant to disputes regarding Iran's nuclear capabilities. From Iran's perspective, the nuclear program has been connected to technological development, national autonomy, deterrence, sovereignty, and resistance to external coercion. From the perspective of states that perceive Iran as a security competitor, however, the accumulation of nuclear knowledge, enrichment capacity, missile technology, and associated infrastructure can change expectations about future capabilities. European responses to Iran's nuclear program following the JCPOA have also demonstrated how hedging and alignment choices evolve as uncertainty regarding proliferation, sanctions, and regional conflict increases (Eslami, 2026). The significance of the nuclear issue therefore extends beyond its technical dimensions because it interacts directly with calculations of future power.

Balancing is one of the principal responses to perceived concentrations of power. Internal balancing occurs when a state increases its own military, technological, or economic capabilities, whereas external balancing involves partnerships and alliances designed to offset another actor. Israel has pursued both forms in relation to Iran. Its independent military capabilities, intelligence resources, missile defense systems, and technological advantages represent internal balancing, while close strategic cooperation with the United States and relationships with regional states provide forms of external balancing. Research characterizing Israeli strategy toward Iran through the concept of omnibalancing highlights the combination of multiple political and security instruments employed to counter perceived Iranian threats (Darini & Nourmohammadi, 2023). Israel's broader relationships with states interacting with Iran can also affect Tehran's strategic position. For example, research on Russia–Israel relations has demonstrated that Israeli diplomatic and security engagement with Moscow has had consequences for Iranian interests, particularly where Russian, Israeli, and Iranian objectives have intersected in regional conflict zones (Shafaghat Niabad & Jafari, 2021).

Saudi Arabia likewise combines internal and external balancing. Its substantial defense expenditures and acquisition of advanced weapons represent one dimension, while its long-standing security relationship with the United States constitutes another. U.S.–Saudi military cooperation affects not merely bilateral defense but the wider regional distribution of capabilities. Studies of plausible trajectories in U.S.–Saudi arms cooperation have emphasized their implications for Iran's interests in West Asia, particularly because advanced weapons transfers influence perceptions of vulnerability and strategic balance (Khodaei et al., 2022). Saudi Arabia has also relied on coalition mechanisms in regional crises, most prominently in Yemen. The experience of the Saudi-led coalition illustrates both the utility and limitations of military coalitions: partnerships can aggregate resources and political support, but differences in objectives, operational capacity, and long-term strategy can complicate the conversion of material superiority into stable political outcomes (Munassar, 2025). This is analytically important because coalition-building should not be treated as evidence of complete strategic unity.

The distinction between alliance and interest alignment is therefore essential. Israel and Saudi Arabia do not need a formal bilateral military alliance for their policies to become strategically complementary. When both identify aspects of Iranian power as threatening, each may support policies that constrain Tehran, strengthen U.S. regional involvement, or prevent major shifts in the regional balance. Such convergence can occur independently, through parallel relations with Washington, or through limited direct and indirect coordination. Structural neorealism explains this behavior through shared incentives rather than shared

identity. Historically different political systems and divergent positions on the Palestinian question do not preclude convergence in a particular security domain. Indeed, one of the central propositions of realist analysis is that alignments change as threat perceptions change. States that previously lacked close strategic relations may find cooperation advantageous when confronted by a common source of insecurity.

This logic should nevertheless be applied carefully. Treating Iran as a uniform and permanent threat would obscure variation in Iranian foreign policy and the possibility of accommodation. The 2023 restoration of diplomatic relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia provides evidence that balancing can coexist with diplomatic engagement. Chinese mediation enabled Tehran and Riyadh to restore formal relations after years of rupture, demonstrating that regional competitors can attempt to manage rather than eliminate rivalry (Rahimi, 2023). Recent analysis similarly emphasizes that Iran and Saudi Arabia can function either as spoilers or enablers in regional conflicts depending on the issue, incentives, and diplomatic environment (Keynoush, 2025). From a neorealist standpoint, such accommodation is not inconsistent with structural competition. If the costs of confrontation increase, states may seek limited cooperation to reduce vulnerability while retaining independent balancing capabilities.

The same qualification applies to Iran's own alignment behavior. Iran has deepened ties with Russia and China without converting these relationships into a conventional alliance equivalent to U.S. alliances in the region. Its strategy reflects both the constraints created by sanctions and international pressure and an interest in avoiding complete strategic dependence on any single external power. Recent analysis characterizes Tehran's relations with China, Russia, and members of the Gulf Cooperation Council as forms of pragmatic adaptation to a shifting distribution of power (Bazoobandi, 2026). Iran's behavior in the South Caucasus also illustrates concern with the preservation of regional equilibrium. Changes following the Karabakh conflicts and the expanding roles of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Israel have required Tehran to adjust policies in an environment where its opportunities are constrained by wider tensions with the West (Golmohammadi & Azizi, 2025). These cases reveal that the logic of balancing is not exclusive to Iran's opponents; Iran also responds to perceived encirclement, external alliances, and unfavorable shifts in the regional distribution of capabilities.

The concept of threat therefore mediates between power and coalition formation. States rarely balance mechanically against every concentration of material capability. Geography, offensive potential, historical experience, political signaling, and uncertainty concerning intentions influence which capabilities are interpreted as threatening. Israel's proximity to Iranian-linked armed actors and concern regarding missile and nuclear capabilities contributes to a threat assessment different from that of geographically distant states. Saudi Arabia's threat perception is shaped by geographical proximity to Iran across the Persian Gulf, vulnerability of energy infrastructure, competition in neighboring Arab states, and concerns regarding missile and drone capabilities. Iran, meanwhile, assesses U.S. military deployments, Israeli military power, regional defense partnerships, and arms transfers as potential threats to its own security. The result is a multidirectional security dilemma in which each actor's attempt to improve its strategic position can reduce the perceived security of another.

Structural realism therefore provides a mechanism for understanding the persistence of confrontation without assuming that every actor intentionally seeks permanent hostility. Iran may strengthen missile capabilities to deter attack; Israel may interpret these capabilities as evidence of a growing threat and deepen coordination with Washington; Saudi Arabia may expand military cooperation with the United States because of concerns regarding Iranian influence; Iran may interpret those partnerships as encirclement and intensify asymmetric or military capabilities in response. The sequence can reproduce itself even when individual decisions are defensively motivated. Research on the broader Iran–U.S. confrontation has similarly emphasized that mutually reinforcing strategic and ideological variables have made the relationship resistant to normalization (Banihashemi et al., 2022). Studies of future scenarios have also indicated that changes in one dimension, such as nuclear diplomacy, do not automatically resolve the other sources of rivalry (Rajabi Dehbarzouei & Bidgoli, 2021).

Coalition-building becomes particularly important when states believe that unilateral balancing is insufficient.

The United States functions as a force multiplier for its regional partners because it can provide advanced weapons, intelligence cooperation, diplomatic protection, sanctions enforcement, and military deterrence. Consequently, Israeli and Saudi preferences regarding Washington's policy toward Tehran are strategically significant even when they do not determine American policy. Their interests intersect with independent U.S. concerns regarding nuclear proliferation, regional stability, energy security, freedom of navigation, protection of partners, and the maintenance of American influence. U.S. Middle East strategy has historically attempted to reconcile these objectives while avoiding excessive costs and preventing regional competitors from overturning arrangements favorable to Washington (Khosravi, 2019). The persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility can thus be conceptualized as an interaction between bilateral conflict and a wider balancing system in which regional partners possess incentives to encourage policies that prevent Iranian predominance.

The theoretical logic developed here can be summarized without reducing regional politics to fixed blocs. Structural pressures generate security competition; security competition encourages balancing; balancing produces bilateral and multilateral partnerships; and those partnerships alter the incentives surrounding Iran–U.S. relations. Israel and Saudi Arabia participate in this process because their own security calculations overlap with some American objectives concerning Iran. Iran responds through deterrence, regional partnerships, diplomatic diversification, and cooperation with non-Western powers. The resulting pattern is self-reinforcing but not immutable. Changes in relative power, threat perception, diplomatic incentives, or external great-power involvement can modify alignments. Structural neorealism therefore explains persistence not as inevitability, but as the outcome of recurrent incentives embedded within the regional distribution of power.

3. Iran–U.S. Hostility and the Regional Balance of Power

The transformation of Iran–U.S. relations after the 1979 Revolution reconfigured the political architecture of the Persian Gulf and broader Middle East. Before the revolution, Iran had occupied an important position within the American regional security framework; afterward, the relationship shifted toward mutual suspicion and confrontation. Subsequent crises consolidated a pattern in which each side increasingly interpreted the other through a security-centered lens. The hostage crisis, U.S. policy during the Iran–Iraq War, sanctions, disagreements over regional conflicts, Iranian opposition to U.S. military presence, American concerns regarding Iranian support for armed groups, and disputes concerning the nuclear program accumulated across successive decades. Research on the confrontational approach between the two states emphasizes that the persistence of hostility results from interacting political, strategic, and regional factors rather than any single episode (Banihashemi et al., 2022). The relationship therefore developed a degree of path dependence: earlier conflicts shaped later expectations, and negative expectations increased the political and strategic costs of reciprocal trust.

The regional dimension of the confrontation became increasingly important as the Middle East experienced repeated transformations following the end of the Cold War, the Gulf wars, the attacks of September 11, 2001, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, the Arab uprisings, the Syrian civil war, the rise and territorial decline of the Islamic State, the war in Yemen, and the gradual emergence of new forms of Arab–Israeli cooperation. U.S. policy toward the region has consistently combined several objectives, including maintaining access to strategic waterways, protecting partners, countering terrorism, addressing proliferation, preserving influence, and preventing the emergence of regional conditions considered unfavorable to American interests (Khosravi, 2019). Iran, by contrast, has sought to reduce the vulnerability created by U.S. military predominance and cultivate political and security relationships that expand its strategic depth. These competing objectives have repeatedly intersected in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, the Persian Gulf, and the Palestinian arena.

From Tehran's perspective, the extensive U.S. military and security presence surrounding Iran creates a structural vulnerability. American forces and facilities have operated in multiple neighboring or nearby states, while Washington has maintained defense partnerships with Gulf monarchies and Israel. Iran's strategic response has included investment in ballistic and cruise missiles, drones, asymmetric naval capabilities, air

defense, and relationships with allied or partner non-state actors. Iranian policymakers have frequently presented these capabilities as deterrent instruments intended to compensate for conventional military asymmetry. Yet capabilities developed for deterrence can create insecurity for neighboring states because their strategic effect does not depend solely on the declared intentions of the possessing state. Saudi Arabia and Israel therefore evaluate Iranian missile, drone, and regional-network capabilities partly in terms of their potential future use rather than exclusively in terms of Tehran's stated objectives. This dynamic reproduces the security dilemma described in analyses of Iran–Saudi competition (Souri, 2022).

The nuclear issue intensified these dynamics because it linked technological capability to expectations concerning future strategic power. Negotiations culminating in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action demonstrated that Iran and the United States could reach a limited agreement on an issue central to their rivalry, but the agreement did not eliminate disagreements over regional policy, missile development, sanctions architecture, or the U.S. security relationship with Israel and the Gulf states. Washington's subsequent withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and restoration of extensive sanctions deepened distrust in Tehran and weakened the expectation that nuclear diplomacy would necessarily lead to broader normalization. Research on the future of Iran–U.S. political relations has consequently treated the nuclear dispute as one component of a wider strategic conflict rather than its sole cause (Tabatabaei & Nourani, 2019). Analyses of later U.S. policy likewise emphasized the difficulty of restoring diplomacy while addressing the expanded range of regional and security disputes that had developed around the nuclear question (Radfar & Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2020).

The role of sanctions is structurally significant because economic coercion affects Iran's ability to convert material resources into regional capabilities. Restrictions on oil exports, financial transactions, investment, and access to technology can reduce state revenue and increase the costs of military modernization and regional activity. Sanctions therefore operate not only as instruments designed to change specific policies but also as mechanisms affecting the balance of capabilities. For Israel and Saudi Arabia, a heavily sanctioned Iran may face greater constraints in expanding economic and military influence. From Tehran's perspective, however, the extensive use of sanctions reinforces the belief that vulnerability to Western-controlled economic networks represents a national-security risk. Iran has consequently attempted to diversify economic relations, deepen ties with non-Western powers, and develop mechanisms of strategic adaptation. Recent research describes Iran's engagement with China, Russia, and Gulf states as pragmatic responses to an international environment in which Western pressure remains substantial (Bazoobandi, 2026). International stigmatization has similarly generated mixed Iranian responses combining resistance, adaptation, and attempts to redefine the political costs of isolation (Pesaran, 2026).

The regional balance is also affected by Iran's network of relationships with armed non-state actors and political movements. These relationships have provided Tehran with influence beyond its borders and, from the Iranian perspective, have created forms of forward deterrence against adversaries possessing superior conventional capabilities. Israel, however, interprets Iranian support for Hezbollah and other armed groups as a direct security concern, while Saudi Arabia has historically viewed Iranian relationships with actors in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere as evidence of expanding regional influence. The resulting conflict is not simply ideological; it concerns the distribution of coercive capacity across territories and political systems. The escalation of direct Iran–Israel confrontation in the mid-2020s further demonstrated the possibility that long-standing indirect competition can move toward direct military exchange when established thresholds erode (Pinfold et al., 2025). Such escalation strengthens the importance of alliance and coalition relationships because neither side evaluates confrontation solely through bilateral capabilities.

Saudi Arabia's military relationship with the United States occupies a particularly important place in this balance. Arms transfers and defense cooperation provide Riyadh with capabilities that affect Iranian calculations regarding the Gulf security environment. Research examining alternative scenarios for Saudi–U.S. arms cooperation identifies potential consequences for Iran's interests and regional strategic position (Khodaei et al., 2022). At the same time, Saudi dependence on

external defense support has not prevented Riyadh from seeking strategic autonomy. Its diplomacy with China, Russia, and Iran indicates an effort to diversify relationships and reduce exposure to changes in U.S. policy. The 2023 Saudi–Iranian rapprochement is important in this respect because it demonstrated that Riyadh can pursue de-escalation with Tehran while retaining its security partnership with Washington (Rahimi, 2023). This combination resembles hedging rather than a simple permanent alignment against Iran.

Israel's relationship with the United States differs from Saudi Arabia's because of its deeper technological, military, political, and institutional integration with American security strategy. Israeli policymakers have consistently treated the prevention of major hostile military capabilities in neighboring or regional adversaries as a central security objective. Iran's nuclear infrastructure, missile forces, drone capabilities, and regional partnerships therefore occupy a significant place in Israeli threat assessments. Research on Israel's balancing strategy toward Iran emphasizes the use of diplomatic, military, intelligence, and external-balancing mechanisms to constrain Iranian capabilities (Darini & Nourmohammadi, 2023). Israeli relations with additional external actors, including Russia, have also been interpreted partly through their implications for Iran's freedom of action, particularly in regional theaters where Iranian and Israeli interests intersect (Shafaghat Niabad & Jafari, 2021).

The American position is nevertheless not reducible to the preferences of either partner. Washington has its own objectives and faces costs associated with prolonged regional confrontation. American administrations have periodically sought diplomatic engagement with Tehran when they judged that negotiated arrangements could advance nonproliferation or regional-security objectives. At other moments, coercive pressure has been prioritized. The Biden administration inherited this tension and attempted to combine interest in diplomacy with deterrence and continued security support for regional partners (Hamidi et al., 2021). Research conducted during this period anticipated that Washington's Iran policy would remain constrained by the interaction of nuclear diplomacy, domestic politics, regional alliances, and Iranian regional behavior (Radfar & Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2020). This variability demonstrates that Israel and Saudi Arabia influence but do not determine American strategy.

The regional environment also changes as Iran adjusts relationships with its neighbors. Iran's foreign policy cannot be characterized solely in terms of confrontation because Tehran has pursued selective cooperation where it considers accommodation consistent with national interests. Its recent relationships with Gulf Cooperation Council states illustrate strategic flexibility, while rapprochement with Saudi Arabia has reduced some immediate channels of escalation (Keynoush, 2025). Iran's foreign policy in the South Caucasus likewise reflects the importance of preserving a favorable regional balance in response to changing Turkish, Azerbaijani, Russian, and Israeli roles (Golmohammadi & Azizi, 2025). These cases suggest that Iranian strategy is shaped by the same structural incentives that affect its competitors: avoiding isolation, preventing encirclement, maintaining influence, and adjusting to changes in the distribution of power.

Nevertheless, de-escalation between Iran and individual regional states does not automatically resolve Iran–U.S. hostility. Tehran and Washington continue to confront different structural positions. The United States is an extra-regional great power with a network of security partnerships, while Iran is a regional power seeking greater autonomy from U.S.-centered arrangements. American efforts to preserve partner security can therefore appear to Tehran as containment, while Iranian attempts to expand deterrent depth can appear to Washington and its partners as revisionist expansion. This reciprocal interpretation generates a durable conflict of security logics. Research addressing prospects for Iran–U.S. relations has emphasized that political, economic, and security disputes interact in ways that make comprehensive normalization difficult even when temporary agreements are achievable (Rajabi Dehbarzouei & Bidgoli, 2021).

The consequence is a regional security structure in which the persistence of bilateral hostility creates strategic benefits and costs for multiple actors. Israel can benefit from sustained American attention to Iranian capabilities and from security arrangements that constrain Tehran's regional freedom of action. Saudi Arabia can benefit from security guarantees and advanced defense cooperation justified partly by perceptions of Iranian power, although excessive Iran–

U.S. escalation can simultaneously threaten Saudi territory, energy infrastructure, and economic transformation. Iran may also derive certain domestic and strategic advantages from presenting itself as resistant to American regional dominance, although sanctions and military pressure impose substantial costs. The United States obtains leverage through alliances and sanctions but must bear financial, military, and diplomatic costs associated with sustaining confrontation. Structural neorealism therefore suggests that the persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility cannot be explained simply as a situation in which one set of actors benefits and another loses. Instead, it is maintained by intersecting security calculations in which actors repeatedly select strategies that appear rational individually but collectively reproduce the confrontational structure.

This structural persistence also explains why diplomatic breakthroughs have frequently remained issue-specific. Nuclear negotiations can reduce proliferation risk without resolving regional competition. Iran–Saudi rapprochement can reduce bilateral tensions without transforming Iran–Israel hostility. American attempts to decrease direct military commitments can coexist with expanded arms cooperation and greater reliance on regional partners. Iranian diversification toward Russia and China can mitigate some effects of Western pressure without eliminating Iran's dependence on regional stability and access to international markets. The system therefore displays both adaptation and continuity. The central analytical implication is that a durable transformation of Iran–U.S. relations would require not merely a bilateral agreement but changes in the security expectations and balancing incentives of the wider regional system.

4. Israel and Saudi Arabia: Interest Convergence and Regional Coalition-Building

Israel's interest in the trajectory of Iran–U.S. relations originates principally in its assessment of Iran as a major regional security competitor. The confrontation involves several interconnected dimensions: the Iranian nuclear program, missile and drone capabilities, Tehran's support for Hezbollah and other armed organizations, Iranian influence in Syria and Iraq, and the broader capacity of Iran to shape political and security outcomes across the region. These concerns generate strong Israeli incentives to favor American policies that limit Iran's military and strategic options. Israel possesses substantial independent capabilities, but cooperation with the United States magnifies its capacity to deter Iran, obtain intelligence, acquire advanced military technology, and generate international pressure against activities it considers threatening. Structural balancing therefore provides a more parsimonious explanation of Israeli strategy than an approach based exclusively on ideological hostility. Research on Israel's omnibalancing behavior toward Iran identifies the use of multiple internal and external instruments intended to constrain Iranian influence and preserve Israel's security position (Darini & Nourmohammadi, 2023).

The nuclear question occupies a particularly prominent place within Israeli threat perceptions because even the possibility of a major change in Iran's nuclear capabilities could alter regional deterrence calculations. Israel's concerns are not limited to the immediate use of a nuclear weapon but include the possibility that a threshold or latent capability could increase Tehran's strategic confidence, reduce the freedom of action of regional adversaries, and encourage further proliferation. The deterioration of the Iran–Israel shadow conflict into more direct confrontation has heightened these concerns, particularly as missiles, drones, cyber operations, covert actions, and regional armed networks have become integrated into the competitive relationship (Pinfold et al., 2025). From this perspective, continued American pressure on Iran can serve Israeli interests by constraining resources, reinforcing deterrence, and increasing the political and economic costs associated with Iranian military expansion.

Yet Israeli preferences do not automatically translate into U.S. policy. Washington has repeatedly balanced Israeli concerns against wider objectives, including preventing regional war, preserving relations with Arab partners, protecting global energy flows, avoiding nuclear proliferation, and reducing the financial and military costs of Middle Eastern commitments. The JCPOA itself illustrated a divergence between the preferences of an Israeli government strongly critical of the agreement and an American administration that regarded negotiated constraints as useful for addressing the nuclear issue. Later U.S. withdrawal from the agreement produced another strategic configuration,

demonstrating that domestic American politics and presidential priorities remain important. The significance of Israel should therefore be understood as part of a broader network of structural and political influences rather than as a single controlling variable. Nonetheless, where Israeli threat perceptions align with independent American concerns regarding Iranian capabilities, the two states possess strong incentives for sustained strategic coordination.

Saudi Arabia's interests differ in several respects. Unlike Israel, Saudi Arabia shares the Persian Gulf strategic environment with Iran and must manage the consequences of escalation in its immediate neighborhood. Riyadh competes with Tehran over political influence and regional security, but it also has compelling reasons to prevent uncontrolled military confrontation. Saudi cities, oil infrastructure, ports, desalination facilities, transportation networks, and other critical assets are vulnerable to missiles and drones, making a direct regional conflict potentially costly regardless of which side initiated escalation. The Saudi security dilemma with Iran therefore contains a paradox: Riyadh benefits from American deterrence against Iranian coercion while simultaneously benefiting from a regional environment in which the likelihood of direct war remains limited (Souri, 2022). This helps explain why Saudi policy can combine advanced arms acquisition and U.S. security cooperation with diplomatic rapprochement toward Tehran.

Energy adds another dimension to Saudi calculations. Saudi Arabia's position as a major oil producer gives it considerable economic and strategic influence, while Iran also possesses substantial hydrocarbon resources. Sanctions that constrain Iranian oil exports can affect market shares and the broader structure of energy competition, although Saudi oil policy cannot be reduced to a simple attempt to displace Iranian exports because Riyadh must also consider price stability, cooperation within OPEC+, domestic economic objectives, relations with other producers, and global demand. The interaction of energy security and geopolitical rivalry nevertheless means that changes in Iran's access to international markets can produce consequences for Saudi interests. The original structure of the Iran–U.S. confrontation thus intersects with economic as well as military dimensions of the regional balance.

The U.S.–Saudi defense partnership is even more directly relevant. Saudi Arabia has historically relied on American weapons, training, intelligence, and security commitments to strengthen deterrence and compensate for vulnerabilities. Analyses of Saudi–U.S. arms cooperation demonstrate that different levels and forms of military cooperation can alter Iran's strategic calculations and interests across West Asia (Khodaei et al., 2022). Yet the limits of military power have also become apparent. The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen showed that material capabilities and coalition formation do not necessarily produce rapid or decisive political outcomes, particularly in complex conflicts involving local actors, asymmetric warfare, and divergent objectives among coalition members (Munassar, 2025). The experience reinforced incentives for Saudi policymakers to supplement military balancing with diplomatic risk management.

The 2023 restoration of Iranian–Saudi diplomatic relations therefore represents adaptation rather than the disappearance of competition. China's mediation provided a mechanism through which the two states could lower immediate tensions while retaining different regional interests and security partnerships (Rahimi, 2023). Subsequent analysis has emphasized that Tehran and Riyadh can either facilitate or complicate regional conflict resolution depending on the strategic context, meaning that their relationship should be understood as variable rather than permanently confrontational (Keynoush, 2025). From a neorealist perspective, the rapprochement is consistent with a strategy of reducing unnecessary costs while preserving balancing options. Saudi Arabia does not need to abandon its U.S. partnership to improve relations with Iran, just as Iran does not need to abandon competition with Washington to pursue accommodation with Riyadh.

The importance of Saudi–Israeli convergence arises at precisely this intersection between persistent competition and selective flexibility. Saudi Arabia and Israel do not possess identical threat hierarchies, historical experiences, or political objectives. Nevertheless, their concerns have overlapped regarding aspects of Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities, Tehran's regional partnerships, and the possibility of a regional order in which Iranian influence grows while American engagement declines. Shared concerns can generate strategic complementarity without requiring a

formal bilateral alliance. Israel can contribute military technology, intelligence capabilities, missile defense expertise, and close relations with Washington, whereas Saudi Arabia possesses financial resources, energy influence, geographic centrality, and extensive relationships across the Arab and Islamic worlds. From a structural perspective, the combination of these capabilities could contribute to an external balancing arrangement directed at preventing a major shift in regional power toward Iran.

This convergence is particularly important because the United States occupies the central position connecting the two relationships. Washington is Israel's principal strategic partner and has maintained a long-standing security partnership with Saudi Arabia. A regional configuration in which both states identify Iranian capabilities as a major concern increases the likelihood that similar preferences will be communicated to U.S. policymakers from different directions. This does not mean that American policy becomes a simple product of partner pressure. Rather, overlapping threat assessments reduce the political cost of adopting policies that serve several interests simultaneously. Sanctions on Iran, missile-defense cooperation, intelligence sharing, maritime security initiatives, and diplomatic efforts to constrain nuclear escalation can serve U.S., Israeli, and Saudi objectives for different reasons. The resulting policy convergence is therefore better understood as interest alignment than as hierarchical control.

Israel's broader external relationships provide additional evidence of the logic of balancing. Israeli interaction with Russia, for example, has affected Iranian interests where all three states operated within the Syrian strategic environment. Research concerning Russia–Israel relations has demonstrated that bilateral coordination could influence Iran's operational environment and create constraints relevant to Tehran's regional position (Shafaghat Niabad & Jafari, 2021). The implication is that Israel does not rely exclusively on Washington but attempts to develop flexible relationships with actors capable of affecting Iranian power. This pattern is compatible with omnibalancing: when a state confronts a complex threat, it employs multiple diplomatic and strategic channels rather than depending on one alliance alone (Darini & Nourmohammadi, 2023).

Iran has responded through its own alignment strategy. Relations with Russia and China provide diplomatic and economic alternatives to Western-centered structures, while engagement with Gulf states can reduce the effectiveness of regional containment. Tehran's strategy toward China, Russia, and the GCC increasingly reflects pragmatic adaptation rather than a rigid bloc orientation (Bazoobandi, 2026). Iran's policies in the South Caucasus likewise demonstrate concern regarding the emergence of new regional configurations involving Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Israel. External pressure and Iran's difficult relationship with Western powers constrain Tehran's ability to construct broader regional integration, making bilateral and issue-specific partnerships particularly important (Golmohammadi & Azizi, 2025). The regional balance therefore involves competing forms of coalition-building rather than a unilateral process directed against Iran.

The relationship between interest alignment and the persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility becomes clearer when these patterns are considered together. Israel has incentives to prevent a reduction in American attention to Iranian military and nuclear capabilities if such a reduction is expected to weaken deterrence. Saudi Arabia has incentives to maintain credible American security commitments even while pursuing détente with Tehran. The United States has incentives to prevent Iranian regional predominance, protect partners, and limit nuclear proliferation while simultaneously avoiding another large-scale Middle Eastern war. Iran has incentives to resist coercion, maintain strategic autonomy, develop deterrent capabilities, and weaken arrangements it perceives as attempts at encirclement. Each actor's preferences are therefore partially compatible with those of some other actors and partially contradictory. Coalition-building emerges from the compatible portions.

The effect on Iran–U.S. hostility is indirect but substantial. Where Israel and Saudi Arabia perceive improvement in Iran–U.S. relations as likely to produce a major increase in Iranian resources or regional influence without corresponding constraints, they have incentives to favor stronger conditionality in U.S. engagement with Tehran. Conversely, where uncontrolled confrontation threatens Saudi infrastructure or regional economic stability, Riyadh has incentives to support de-escalation. Israel's calculation may differ because its geographic and

security exposure to Iranian-linked actors creates a different threat hierarchy. These differences demonstrate why it would be inaccurate to describe a homogeneous anti-Iran coalition with permanently identical objectives. The more precise structural argument is that shared concerns generate areas of convergence capable of reinforcing American balancing behavior, while divergent interests limit the depth and permanence of that convergence.

The nuclear issue illustrates this mechanism particularly clearly. A diplomatic agreement that significantly constrains Iranian nuclear capabilities may satisfy one aspect of Israeli and Saudi security interests, but disagreements can emerge over sanctions relief if regional partners believe that additional resources would strengthen Iran's regional capabilities. European actors have faced comparable trade-offs between preserving nuclear agreements and responding to broader security concerns, leading to strategies combining hedging and alignment (Eslami, 2026). The persistence of the nuclear dispute is therefore partly related to the fact that it is embedded within a wider competition over regional power. Nuclear diplomacy cannot be insulated completely from missile capabilities, sanctions, alliance commitments, and regional conflicts.

The impact of stigmatization and isolation should also be considered. External pressure can weaken Iran economically, but it can simultaneously strengthen incentives for Tehran to deepen alternative partnerships and develop strategies resistant to Western coercion. Research on Iran's responses to international stigmatization identifies variation rather than a single pattern of capitulation or radicalization (Pesaran, 2026). This complicates balancing strategies because excessive pressure may generate adaptation rather than policy change. Similarly, autocratization and regime type cannot by themselves explain interstate conflict; the relationship between domestic political trajectories and conflict must be assessed within wider strategic contexts (Ko, 2025). For the present analysis, this reinforces the importance of avoiding explanations based solely on the political character of individual states.

A further limitation of coalition-building lies in the possibility of entrapment. A partner may fear abandonment and therefore seek stronger commitments from the United States, while Washington may fear being drawn into conflicts arising from actions it did not initiate. Israel and Saudi Arabia have different capacities to influence these calculations, but the underlying problem applies to both. American policymakers must balance reassurance with restraint. Excessive ambiguity may encourage partners to develop independent capabilities or pursue unilateral action, whereas unconditional support may reduce incentives for restraint. These alliance-management dilemmas contribute to the persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility because American regional credibility is partially connected to its response to Iranian actions affecting partners.

The changing nature of Iranian–Israeli confrontation has heightened this problem. As direct exchanges become more plausible, Washington faces the challenge of supporting Israeli security while preventing regional escalation. Iran simultaneously confronts the problem of demonstrating deterrent resolve without provoking a conflict that could threaten critical infrastructure or political stability. The progression from shadow conflict toward more visible confrontation has therefore made regional coalition dynamics more consequential (Pinfold et al., 2025). In such an environment, the strategic preferences of regional actors can either amplify or moderate Iran–U.S. tensions depending on whether they prioritize deterrence, coercive pressure, or de-escalation.

The Saudi case introduces an important countervailing tendency. Riyadh's economic-development strategy requires a comparatively stable regional environment, making prolonged warfare potentially inconsistent with important domestic objectives. This increases the value of diplomatic relations with Tehran and crisis-management mechanisms even while Saudi Arabia preserves defense ties with Washington. Saudi policy can therefore be interpreted as an attempt to combine balancing with hedging. The outcome is not a transition from rivalry to alliance with Iran but a more flexible approach that reduces dependence on a single strategy. Contemporary analysis of Saudi–Iranian interaction supports this interpretation by emphasizing the coexistence of competition and opportunities for conflict management (Keynoush, 2025).

Consequently, the most important regional mechanism is not a fixed Israel–Saudi alliance against Iran but an evolving pattern of interest convergence that becomes stronger or weaker according to threat perception.

When Iranian nuclear, missile, or regional capabilities are interpreted as expanding rapidly, incentives for parallel balancing increase. When the costs of confrontation become more visible, Saudi incentives for accommodation strengthen. Israeli calculations remain shaped heavily by direct security concerns, while the United States weighs partner preferences against its own global and regional priorities. This flexible configuration helps explain why Iran–U.S. hostility persists even though the intensity of confrontation changes. Regional coalition-building reinforces structural pressures, but it does not eliminate diplomacy, nor does it make escalation inevitable.

The overall logic can therefore be understood as a feedback relationship. Persistent Iran–U.S. hostility encourages Israel and Saudi Arabia to deepen security relationships with Washington; these relationships affect Iran's perception of strategic encirclement and stimulate counterbalancing; Iranian counterbalancing reinforces Israeli and Saudi threat perceptions; and those perceptions provide additional justification for continued American security involvement. The process does not require coordination at every stage. Parallel actions generated by compatible interests are sufficient to reproduce the underlying structure. At the same time, diplomatic interventions such as the Iran–Saudi rapprochement can interrupt portions of this feedback loop without transforming the whole system. The persistence of confrontation is thus rooted not simply in bilateral animosity but in a regional balance in which multiple actors repeatedly adapt to one another's capabilities and alignments.

5. Conclusion

The persistence of hostility between Iran and the United States can be understood more comprehensively when it is situated within the regional distribution of power rather than treated as an exclusively bilateral dispute. Historical grievances, ideological disagreement, sanctions, the nuclear issue, regional military competition, and conflicting conceptions of Middle Eastern order constitute important independent sources of tension between Tehran and Washington, but these factors operate inside a broader security structure. Israel and Saudi Arabia are particularly important within this structure because changes in Iran–U.S. relations directly affect their threat perceptions, security partnerships, regional influence, and calculations regarding the balance of power. Their role is therefore neither peripheral nor sufficient by itself to explain the persistence of the confrontation.

Structural neorealism demonstrates why this pattern can persist even when individual actors periodically seek de-escalation. In an anarchic environment, states cannot depend upon stable intentions and must evaluate the potential capabilities of competitors. Iran's geographic position, missile and drone capabilities, nuclear infrastructure, network of regional partnerships, demographic and economic potential, and capacity to exercise influence beyond its borders make its future power relevant to the security calculations of other regional states. Iran, in turn, confronts extensive American military capabilities, close U.S. security relationships with Israel and Arab states, sophisticated regional weapons systems, economic sanctions, and the possibility of hostile coalitions forming around its periphery. Each side can consequently interpret defensive measures adopted by the other as evidence of offensive potential.

The first major finding is that the persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility generates incentives for balancing behavior among regional actors. Israel regards several dimensions of Iranian power as directly relevant to its national security, particularly nuclear capabilities, missiles and drones, and Iran's relationships with armed actors in the Levant. American involvement provides Israel with additional strategic depth, intelligence cooperation, military technology, diplomatic support, and deterrent capacity. Israel therefore has a structural interest in ensuring that any reduction in U.S.–Iranian tensions does not produce an uncontrolled strengthening of Iranian capabilities. This does not mean that Israel automatically favors unlimited confrontation under all circumstances. Rather, Israeli policy is shaped by an assessment of whether engagement with Iran would constrain or enhance the capabilities that Israel considers threatening.

Saudi Arabia occupies a more complex position. Riyadh and Tehran are regional competitors, particularly in the Persian Gulf and neighboring Arab states, but they also share an immediate geographical environment in which major conflict would impose substantial costs on both. Saudi Arabia therefore has simultaneous incentives to preserve strong external balancing capabilities and to

maintain channels of accommodation with Iran. Its relationship with the United States provides deterrence and access to advanced military capabilities, while diplomatic engagement with Tehran can reduce vulnerability to direct escalation. This dual strategy means that Saudi Arabia cannot accurately be characterized as uniformly supportive of permanent maximum confrontation between Washington and Tehran. Its preferences depend on whether U.S. pressure is perceived as containing Iranian power without producing instability that threatens Saudi security and economic interests.

The second major finding is that Israeli and Saudi interests converge without becoming identical. Both states can perceive aspects of Iranian power as threatening and can favor an American role that prevents a major regional shift in Tehran's favor. Yet Israel and Saudi Arabia differ in geographic exposure, political priorities, historical relationships with Iran, domestic objectives, and the costs they would bear from regional war. Strategic convergence therefore takes the form of overlapping interests rather than a fully unified alliance. This distinction is essential because it explains why cooperation can expand in one period and become more limited in another without invalidating the underlying balancing logic.

The third finding concerns the role of the United States as the principal external actor through which much of this regional balancing is organized. Washington maintains relationships with both Israel and Saudi Arabia while also pursuing independent objectives concerning nuclear proliferation, freedom of navigation, energy security, terrorism, regional stability, and the maintenance of American influence. Israeli and Saudi preferences can reinforce policies already consistent with American interests, particularly where all three actors identify Iranian capabilities as a source of concern. Nevertheless, U.S. policy cannot be reduced to the preferences of its regional partners. American administrations have alternated between coercion and negotiation because Washington must also manage the costs of confrontation and the risk of being drawn into another large-scale regional conflict.

The fourth finding is that coalition-building generates a self-reinforcing security dynamic. When Israel and Saudi Arabia deepen security relationships with the United States in response to Iranian capabilities, Tehran may interpret those relationships as evidence of encirclement and invest further in deterrence, strategic partnerships, missiles, drones, or regional networks. These Iranian responses can subsequently strengthen Israeli and Saudi threat perceptions and encourage additional balancing. The cycle can therefore continue without any actor deliberately designing the entire process. Each decision may appear rational from the perspective of the individual state while producing a collectively less secure regional environment.

This process also explains why sanctions and military pressure do not necessarily produce straightforward outcomes. Pressure can constrain Iran's economic resources and regional activities, but it can also create incentives for strategic adaptation. Tehran can respond by seeking alternative trade relationships, increasing cooperation with non-Western powers, building indigenous military capabilities, and strengthening partnerships designed to reduce dependence on international structures dominated by the United States. Consequently, the effectiveness of external pressure depends not merely on its intensity but on the alternatives available to Iran and the political objectives attached to coercion.

A fifth finding is that diplomacy remains possible inside a structurally competitive environment. The restoration of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia is significant precisely because it shows that regional rivals can reduce immediate tensions without eliminating their differences. Structural competition does not imply continuous military escalation. States can cooperate when the costs of rivalry become excessive, when mediation creates credible opportunities, or when economic and security interests favor stabilization. Diplomatic engagement can therefore reduce specific dimensions of the regional security dilemma even if it does not alter the overall distribution of power.

The same principle applies to Iran–U.S. diplomacy. Negotiation can produce meaningful agreements on specific issues without automatically resolving the broader structure of hostility. A nuclear agreement may address proliferation concerns but leave disagreements over sanctions, regional influence, missiles, Israel, Gulf security, and armed non-state actors unresolved. Conversely, progress in regional diplomacy may improve the political environment for bilateral negotiations but cannot substitute for direct engagement over issues

specific to Tehran and Washington. Durable transformation therefore requires multiple layers of conflict management rather than reliance on one comprehensive diplomatic event.

The analysis also indicates that the role of Israel and Saudi Arabia should be conceptualized as reinforcing rather than originating the entire Iran–U.S. confrontation. The bilateral relationship contains independent historical and strategic sources of distrust that would remain relevant even in the absence of either regional actor. Nevertheless, Israeli and Saudi interests affect the environment in which American policy toward Iran is formulated and implemented. Their partnerships with Washington, their assessments of Iranian capabilities, and their own regional policies can increase or decrease the costs associated with alternative U.S. strategies. They consequently contribute to the institutionalization of a regional balance in which Iran is frequently treated as a competitor to be deterred or constrained.

At the same time, Iran is not merely the passive object of this balancing structure. Tehran actively shapes regional dynamics through its own security policies, partnerships, military capabilities, diplomatic initiatives, and responses to external pressure. Iranian efforts to strengthen deterrence can create new incentives for balancing by other states, just as external military partnerships can encourage further Iranian counterbalancing. A structural explanation must therefore avoid assigning the entire causal burden to one side. The persistence of hostility is produced through interaction.

The logic connecting these variables can ultimately be expressed as a sequence in which perceived changes in Iranian power influence Israeli and Saudi security assessments; these assessments encourage varying degrees of alignment and external balancing; the United States provides the primary institutional and military framework for much of that balancing; Iran interprets intensified regional alignment as a potential threat and develops counterbalancing strategies; and the resulting responses reproduce the regional security dilemma within which Iran–U.S. hostility continues. This sequence does not operate mechanically in every period, but it identifies the structural mechanism connecting regional interests to bilateral confrontation.

Accordingly, the continuation of Iran–U.S. hostility is best understood as the outcome of both bilateral antagonism and regional systemic pressures. Israel and Saudi Arabia possess important interests in preventing regional developments that they believe would significantly increase Iranian relative power, while Iran seeks to prevent an American-centered regional order from restricting its strategic autonomy. The United States attempts to protect partners and preserve influence while avoiding the costs of uncontrolled escalation. These objectives overlap sufficiently to sustain balancing coalitions yet diverge sufficiently to permit periodic diplomatic adjustment.

The main implication is that a lasting reduction in Iran–U.S. hostility would require more than bilateral rapprochement. It would also require a regional environment in which changes in relations between Tehran and Washington are not automatically interpreted by other actors as producing unacceptable losses in security or relative power. This would depend on credible mechanisms for managing nuclear uncertainty, missile and drone threats, regional armed conflicts, maritime security, external military deployments, and competition among regional states. Without such mechanisms, even successful bilateral diplomacy remains vulnerable to renewed security dilemmas and counterbalancing.

The logic of interest alignment and regional coalition-building therefore helps explain both continuity and change. It explains continuity because Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the United States repeatedly adapt to one another in ways that can reproduce confrontation. It explains change because these alignments are neither permanent nor ideologically predetermined; they become stronger or weaker as threat perceptions, relative capabilities, economic priorities, and diplomatic opportunities evolve. The persistence of Iran–U.S. hostility is thus not an inevitable product of immutable enmity. It is a politically and strategically reproduced condition embedded in a regional balance of power whose transformation depends on altering the incentives that continually regenerate confrontation.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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