

# The Emerging Risk of a Third World War: Geopolitical Rivalries and the Iran–Israel– United States Conflict

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## **Abstract**

The growing tensions between Iran, Israel, and the United States have become a major security concern in the Middle East. The conflict escalated on 28 February 2026 when the United States and Israel launched large air and missile strikes on Iran targeting military and nuclear facilities. In response, Iran carried out missile and drone attacks on Israel and on U.S. military bases in several Gulf countries. As many countries host U.S. military bases, they have become indirectly involved in the conflict. This situation has raised global concerns that the regional war could expand into a larger international crisis. This study examines geopolitical rivalries, military escalation, the involvement of global powers, and the strategic importance of energy routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, while exploring whether these tensions could increase the risk of a third world war.

**Keywords:** Iran–Israel Conflict, United States Foreign Policy, Middle East Geopolitics, Military Escalation, Proxy Warfare, Nuclear Proliferation, Strategic Alliances, Missile and Drone Warfare, Strait of Hormuz, Energy Security, Global Security, Regional Instability, International Relations, Risk of World War III, Conflict Escalation, Diplomatic Crisis, Global Power Rivalry.

## **Introduction**

The Middle East is one of the most sensitive and strategically important regions in the world. In recent years, tensions between Iran, Israel, and the United States have increased significantly, creating serious concerns for regional and global security. Political rivalry, military competition, and ideological differences between these countries have contributed to a rapidly escalating conflict.

The situation became more serious on **28 February 2026** when the United States and Israel launched large air and missile strikes on Iranian military and nuclear facilities. In response, Iran carried out missile and drone attacks against Israel and several U.S. military bases located in Gulf countries. Because many countries host U.S. bases, the conflict has begun to involve multiple states, raising fears that the crisis could spread beyond the region.

This study examines the geopolitical rivalry between Iran, Israel, and the United States and analyzes how military escalation, international involvement, and strategic locations such as the Strait of Hormuz influence the conflict. It also explores whether the growing tensions in the region could increase the risk of a wider international war and potentially contribute to the emergence of a third world war.

## **Historical Background of the Iran–Israel Rivalry**

Iran and Israel were friendly before 1979. Iran recognized Israel and both countries cooperated in trade, security, and politics. During the rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, relations were strong, with close

partnerships in the Middle East.

After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Iran's new Islamic government under Ruhollah Khomeini cut all ties with Israel, refused to recognize it, and adopted a policy to oppose its existence. Since then, tensions have grown due to Iran supporting groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Israel targeting Iranian military and nuclear programs.

Over time, the rivalry expanded through proxy wars, cyberattacks, and direct military confrontations, including the 2006 Lebanon War, the Syrian and Yemeni conflicts, and recent escalations in 2024–2026, culminating in missile strikes, air campaigns, and the assassination of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

## Conflicts Between Iran and Israel

### Alliance Period (1948–1979)

- After Israel was created in 1948, Iran was one of the few Middle Eastern countries that maintained relations with Israel.
- Under Iran's ruler Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, both countries cooperated in trade, intelligence, and military matters.
- Israel received oil from Iran and provided weapons and military training.

### The Iranian Revolution, also known as the Islamic Revolution (1979)

- In 1979, the Iranian Revolution led by Ruhollah Khomeini overthrew the Shah.
- The new Islamic government declared Israel an illegitimate state.
- Diplomatic relations were cut, and Iran began supporting groups fighting Israel.

### Iran–Iraq War and Secret Contacts (1980s)

- During the **Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988)**, Iran secretly obtained weapons from Israel despite public hostility.
- These secret arms deals were connected to the **Iran–Contra scandal** in the United States.
- However, cooperation gradually ended by the **mid-1980s**.

### Creation of Hezbollah (1982)

- In 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon.
- Iran sent its Revolutionary Guard forces to Lebanon and helped establish Hezbollah.
- Hezbollah became Iran's main proxy force against Israel along Israel's northern border

### Proxy Conflict (1990s–2000s)

Iran expanded its influence in the Middle East by supporting militant groups fighting Israel.

- Iran funded and armed **Palestinian Islamic Jihad**.
- Weapons and training were provided to Hezbollah in Lebanon.
- Israel began viewing Iran as its **main strategic enemy in the region**.

### 2006 Israel–Hezbollah War

- Hezbollah attacked Israeli soldiers near the Lebanon border.
- Israel launched a major military operation in Lebanon.
- The **34-day war** showed how Iran could fight Israel indirectly through Hezbollah.

### Iran's Nuclear Program Raises Tensions (2000s–2010s)

- Iran developed a controversial **nuclear program**, which Israel believed could lead to nuclear weapons.
- Israeli leaders such as Benjamin Netanyahu repeatedly warned that a nuclear-armed Iran would threaten Israel's existence.

○ International negotiations led to the **2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA)** to limit Iran's nuclear program  
**Collapse of the Nuclear Deal (2018–2020)**

- The United States withdrew from the nuclear deal in **2018**.
- Iran gradually increased its **uranium enrichment**, increasing tensions with Israel and the West

#### **Direct Military Escalation (2024)**

- In **April 2024**, Iran launched hundreds of **missiles and drones toward Israel** after Israeli actions against Iranian commanders.
- Israel responded with **airstrikes on Iranian military targets**.
- This was one of the **first direct attacks between the two countries**, not through proxies.

#### **The 12-Day War (June 2025)**

- Israel launched massive airstrikes on Iran's nuclear facilities and military bases.
- About **200 Israeli fighter jets attacked more than 100 targets**.
- Iran retaliated with **hundreds of drones and ballistic missiles** targeting Israeli cities.
- **A ceasefire ended the conflict after 12 days**.

#### **Wider War and Missile Strikes (2026)**

On **28 February 2026**, Israel and the United States launched **coordinated surprise airstrikes** on multiple Iranian sites and cities. The operation's most consequential outcome was the **assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei**, along with several high-ranking Iranian officials.

- Khamenei's compound was reportedly destroyed.
- Other senior Iranian leaders were also killed.
- The strikes occurred amid **renewed Iran–US nuclear negotiations**, marking a sudden escalation from diplomatic tensions to open military conflict.

This event marked a turning point, rapidly transforming a regional tension into a **full-scale war**.

#### **Iran's Retaliatory Strikes**

In response, Iran launched **hundreds of drones and ballistic missiles** targeting:

- **Israel** – including civilian areas, military bases, and infrastructure.
- **U.S. military bases** – in Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Oman.
- **UK military base** – the Akrotiri base on Cyprus was also struck by a drone.

Iran and Israel have been enemies for a long time because they have different beliefs, both want to be powerful in the Middle East, and each tries to control influence over other countries. This is why their relationship is very tense.

### **Evolution of Iran–USA Relations (Till 2026)**

The relationship between United States and Iran has evolved through distinct historical phases, shifting from close strategic cooperation to deep-rooted rivalry shaped by geopolitical, ideological, and security factors.

#### **The Pahlavi Era and Strategic Alignment (1953–1978)**

After the 1953 coup, Iran emerged as a crucial ally of the United States in the Middle East. Under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran became a key pillar of Western strategy during the Cold War, acting as a buffer against Soviet expansion in the Persian Gulf region. The United States provided extensive military and economic assistance, helping Iran build one of the strongest militaries in the developing world.

This partnership deepened during the presidency of Richard Nixon under the Nixon Doctrine, which relied on regional allies to maintain stability. Iran was entrusted with safeguarding Western interests in the Gulf, leading to massive arms purchases and increased regional influence.

However, this close association also created internal resentment within Iran. Many citizens viewed the regime as overly dependent on foreign support. Rapid modernization, social inequality, and cultural tensions alienated traditional groups, especially the religious leadership led by Ruhollah Khomeini. These factors laid the foundation for revolutionary upheaval.

### **The Iranian Revolution and Diplomatic Breakdown (1979–1981)**

The Iranian Revolution marked a turning point. The monarchy was replaced by an Islamic Republic, fundamentally transforming Iran's political system and foreign policy orientation. The new regime rejected U.S. influence and adopted an anti-Western stance.

Tensions escalated during the Iran Hostage Crisis, when American diplomats were held for 444 days. In response, the United States froze Iranian assets and severed diplomatic relations—ties that remain officially broken even today.

This period established deep mistrust. The U.S. viewed Iran as a hostile revolutionary state, while Iran framed the U.S. as an imperial power interfering in its sovereignty.

### **War and Strategic Hostility (1980–1988)**

The Iran–Iraq War further intensified tensions. Although officially neutral, the United States tilted toward Iraq, providing indirect support to counterbalance Iran.

Events such as the downing of an Iranian civilian aircraft by U.S. forces in 1988 deepened hostility. For Iran, these actions reinforced the belief that the United States sought to weaken the Islamic Republic, leading Tehran to adopt asymmetric strategies, including proxy networks and missile development.

### **Post–Cold War Engagement Attempts (1989–2001)**

After the Cold War ended in 1989 and the death of Ruhollah Khomeini, the global geopolitical landscape shifted, as the Soviet threat in the region disappeared, creating a potential opportunity for Iran to improve its relations with the United States. Iranian leaders, particularly Mohammad Khatami, promoted a policy of “Dialogue Among Civilizations,” signaling a willingness to engage with the West. Iran even cooperated with the U.S. after the September 11 attacks in 2001, sharing intelligence against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. However, these efforts were undermined when George W. Bush, in 2002, publicly labeled Iran as part of the “Axis of Evil,” alongside Iraq and North Korea, portraying it as a global security threat. This rhetoric weakened reformist voices in Iran who favored engagement, while strengthening hardliners who argued that the U.S. could not be trusted, ultimately reinforcing the cycle of mistrust between the two countries.

### **Nuclear Diplomacy and the JCPOA (2002–2015)**

One of the most critical issues in Iran–USA relations has been Iran's nuclear program. Tensions escalated in the early 2000s when previously undisclosed nuclear facilities were revealed, raising concerns in the United States and its allies that Iran might be pursuing nuclear weapons.

After years of sanctions and diplomatic pressure, a major breakthrough occurred in 2015 with the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action under President Barack Obama.

The agreement placed strict limits on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.

This period marked:

- A temporary reduction in tensions
- Renewed diplomatic engagement
- Hope for long-term normalization of relations

### **Collapse of the Nuclear Deal and Renewed Confrontation (2018–2020)**

Relations deteriorated sharply when President Donald Trump withdrew from the JCPOA in 2018. The United States reimposed severe economic sanctions under a “maximum pressure” policy. This led Iran to gradually reduce its compliance with the deal, increasing uranium enrichment and intensifying tensions. The situation reached a dangerous peak in 2020 with the U.S. assassination of Qasem Soleimani, a top Iranian military commander. Iran retaliated with missile strikes on U.S. bases in Iraq, bringing the two countries to the brink of open war

### **Stalemate and Strategic Competition (2021–2024)**

Under Joe Biden, efforts were made to revive the JCPOA through indirect negotiations. Talks took place in Vienna, but multiple obstacles prevented success. These included disagreements over sanctions relief, Iran's expanded nuclear activities, and domestic political constraints in both countries.

During this period, tensions persisted across several fronts:

- **Nuclear escalation:** Iran expanded uranium enrichment beyond previous limits.
- **Proxy conflicts:** Rivalry continued in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.
- **Regional polarization:** The U.S. strengthened ties with allies like Israel and Gulf states, while Iran deepened its “axis of resistance.”

Despite occasional diplomatic signals, neither side was willing to make the concessions necessary for a comprehensive agreement. As a result, relations remained characterized by mistrust and indirect confrontation rather than direct diplomacy.

### **2025–2026: Renewed Escalation & War**

**June 21, 2025:** The U.S. conducted airstrikes on **Iran's nuclear enrichment facilities in Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan.**

- This marked a direct **U.S. intervention in Iran's nuclear program**, escalating tensions significantly.
- In response, **Iran suspended nuclear talks indefinitely**, halting any potential diplomatic resolution.

#### **Late 2025 – Early 2026**

- **Domestic Iranian Protests:** Economic collapse and social unrest led to **widespread protests across Iran**. The government's crackdown intensified, worsening internal instability.
- **U.S. Response:** The U.S. issued **military warnings, deployed naval and air assets**, and imposed additional sanctions, signaling that further Iranian actions against civilians or regional actors would have consequences.

### **February 28, 2026: Full-Scale Conflict**

- The **U.S. and Israel** launched a coordinated military offensive against Iran, known as **Operation Epic Fury (U.S.) / Operation Roaring Lion (Israel)**.
- Objectives:
  - Destroy Iran's **ballistic missile program**.

- Prevent Iran from developing **nuclear weapons**.
- Impose **regime change** pressures.
- **Casualties & Escalation:**
  - Reports indicate that **Ayatollah Ali Khamenei** was killed.
  - Iran retaliated by launching **missile and drone attacks** on Israel and U.S. bases in **Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan**.
  - Iran also **closed the Strait of Hormuz**, threatening global oil shipping routes, which heightened international concern about regional instability.

### March 2026

- **Economic Fallout:** Oil prices surged due to fears of prolonged conflict and disruptions to global supply. Markets experienced volatility.
- **Diplomatic Efforts:** Intermittent negotiations took place, including **U.S. peace proposals**, but Iran **rejected ceasefire offers** while maintaining conditional openness for talks, primarily focused on **nuclear and sanctions issues**.

## US Role of the United States in the Conflict

### U.S. Support for Israel

The United States is the closest ally of Israel. The U.S. gives Israel strong support in three main ways: money, military help, and diplomacy. Every year, Washington provides billions of dollars in military aid, advanced weapons, and intelligence sharing. The U.S. also supports Israel in international organizations and helps defend its security in the Middle East. It supports Israel's security and Western-aligned values in the region.

### Diplomatic and Strategic Goals

One of the main goals of the United States is to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Different U.S. presidents have used different strategies. For example, Bill Clinton supported peace talks like the Oslo Accords. George W. Bush supported Israel during the 2006 war with Hezbollah. Barack Obama supported diplomacy and helped create the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to control Iran's nuclear program. Later, Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and took a stronger stance against Iran.

### Regional Stability and Security

The United States also keeps military forces in the Persian Gulf to protect shipping routes and energy supplies. It works with regional allies to stop attacks on oil routes and maintain stability. These actions help the U.S. maintain its influence in the Middle East and balance the power between Israel and Iran.

**Military and Strategic Role:** The U.S. also aims to limit Iran's nuclear ambitions, protect shipping routes in the Persian Gulf, and maintain influence in the Middle East. U.S. actions affect the balance of power between Iran and Israel.

## US Role of the United States in Operation Epic Fury (2026)

In 2026, the United States played an important role in **Operation Epic Fury**, a joint military operation with Israel against Iran. The main aim of the operation was to weaken Iran's military power and stop attacks on Israel and U.S. forces in the region.

Another major goal of the United States was to limit Iran's nuclear ambitions and prevent it from developing nuclear weapons. By taking part in the operation, the U.S. aimed to protect its ally Israel and maintain stability and influence in the Middle East.

Iran and Israel have strong political and military tensions. Iran often supports groups that challenge Israel's power in the region. On the other hand, the United States strongly supports Israel and tries to limit Iran's influence and nuclear ambitions. Because of these opposite positions, tensions remain high and achieving long-term peace in the Middle East is difficult.

### **Rising Risk of a Third World War: Iran–Israel–U.S. Conflict**

The growing conflict between Iran, Israel, and the United States has become one of the most serious global security concerns. Recent developments show increasing military actions, rising tensions, and involvement of multiple countries, which could potentially expand into a larger international conflict.

History shows that world wars do not begin suddenly. They develop gradually through rising tensions, repeated conflicts, and failed diplomatic efforts. The current situation in the Middle East reflects similar patterns.

### **From Strikes to Retaliation**

In February 2026, the United States and Israel carried out coordinated strikes on Iran's military and nuclear-related sites. In response, Iran launched missile and drone attacks targeting Israel and U.S. military bases across the region.

The conflict has since expanded, affecting several countries in the Middle East, disrupting airspace, causing civilian casualties, and damaging infrastructure.

Recent reports indicate:

- Continuous missile exchanges between Iran and Israel
- U.S. military involvement and deployment of forces
- Rising oil prices and economic instability
- Spillover effects in countries like Lebanon and Gulf states

### **Why is this conflict important?**

#### **Power Struggle**

Iran and Israel are competing for dominance in the Middle East. The United States strongly supports Israel, which increases tensions and deepens divisions.

#### **Nuclear Weapons Fear**

The U.S. and Israel fear that Iran may develop nuclear weapons. This concern has been a major reason behind military actions and strategic pressure.

#### **Alliances and Global Involvement**

Many countries are indirectly involved:

- Iran has regional allies and proxy groups
- The U.S. has military bases across the region
- Other nations may be drawn in if the conflict escalates

### **The Strategic Role of the Strait of Hormuz in the Iran–Israel–U.S. Conflict**

The Strait of Hormuz is a narrow but critically important waterway lying between Oman and Iran, connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. This strait serves as one of the world's most vital oil transit chokepoints, with approximately 20% of global oil and liquefied natural gas shipments passing through it each day.

Because such a large share of the world's energy supply flows through this narrow passage, any disruption whether from military action, threats, or actual blockage can quickly impact global energy markets, leading to spiking fuel prices, inflation, and broader economic instability.

In the current conflict, Iran has taken measures to control shipping through the strait. Tehran allows “non-hostile” vessels to pass but restricts those linked to the U.S., Israel, and their allies. This demonstrates Iran's effort to assert strategic authority over the waterway.

Iran's actions have **disrupted maritime traffic**, causing delays and increasing risks for vessels. This has heightened global concerns about **energy shortages and rising fuel prices**.

By controlling or threatening the strait, Iran sends a **strategic message**: it can influence international negotiations and deter more extensive military action from the U.S. or its allies.

The situation has prompted concern from world leaders, who emphasize **keeping the strait open** to maintain global trade and energy stability. Naval deployments and diplomatic efforts underscore the strait's critical role.

### **Why could this lead to a bigger war?**

- Direct military confrontation between powerful nations
- Increasing frequency and intensity of attacks
- Involvement of multiple countries and armed groups
- Risk of miscalculation or accidental escalation

The conflict has already spread beyond one country, raising fears of a wider regional war.

### **Will this become World War III?**

It is possible, but not certain. A global war like World War II would require large-scale involvement of multiple major powers.

At present:

- The risk of **regional war is high**
- The risk of **global war remains moderate but growing**

Most countries are still trying to avoid a full-scale world war through diplomacy and negotiations.

### **Conclusion**

The Iran–Israel–U.S. conflict is highly dangerous and has the potential to expand beyond the Middle East. Rising tensions, military escalation, and involvement of multiple nations make the situation extremely sensitive.

While it has not yet become a world war, the risk is increasing. Strong diplomatic efforts and international cooperation are essential to prevent this conflict from turning into a global crisis.

### **Literature Review**

Jingyi Ma analyzes the risk of World War III by examining historical conflicts in the Middle East. The study highlights key factors like the Arab–Israeli Conflict, Gulf wars, terrorism, and nuclear tensions. It concludes that conflicts are likely to remain regional and are unlikely to escalate into a global war.

Mahmoudian argues that the Iran–Israel rivalry has shifted from indirect proxy warfare to direct military confrontation, marking a significant escalation in regional conflict dynamics. He highlights that this

transition increases the risk of broader instability, arms races, and potential involvement of global powers, raising concerns about long-term security in the Middle East.

Ana-Maria Ispas analyzes the longstanding conflict between Iran and Israel, highlighting its roots in the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the subsequent regional power struggles. The study emphasizes the role of proxy wars, nuclear ambitions, and pre-emptive military actions, while also discussing the limitations of international law and the UN Security Council in resolving such conflicts. Overall, it illustrates how historical grievances and geopolitical interests continue to drive instability in the Middle East.

Shoshiashvili and Kapanadze argue that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict involves external powers, with Iran seeking regional dominance and the US supporting Israel to maintain influence. These opposing positions hinder the possibility of a peaceful resolution.

Esmaela, Abbas, and Hamzah state that the Strait of Hormuz is a strategically vital waterway, controlling over 40% of global oil shipments and serving as a critical geopolitical leverage point, particularly for Iran, whose threats to close it remain largely rhetorical due to the overwhelming military and economic repercussions from the United States and its allies. Iran's strategic position, combined with its military capabilities, allows it to exert pressure, yet the economic and military consequences of any prolonged closure make actual enforcement unlikely.

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