

Maktab Competitive Exams Services

Current Affairs Workshop for CSS 2025

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Iran Israel Rivalry: Power Shifts in Syria and Lebanon and Regional Implications

Historic Dynamics of Iran Israel Rivalry

1. Pre-Revolution Period (1948–1979)

Israel and Iran maintained cordial relations after Israel's establishment in 1948. Iran, under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, recognized Israel de facto, though not de jure. Iran supplied Israel with oil, and both collaborated on military and intelligence projects, including Operation Tzafir, involving joint missile development.

2. The Islamic Revolution (1979)

The 1979 Iranian Revolution transformed the relationship. Ayatollah Khomeini's regime adopted a staunchly anti-Israel stance, branding Israel as the "Little Satan" and advocating for the liberation of Palestine.

3. The 1980s: The Iran-Iraq War and Indirect Cooperation

Iran-Contra Affair (1985–1987): Despite public hostility, Israel secretly facilitated U.S. arms sales to Iran during its war with Iraq, exposing pragmatic undercurrents despite ideological enmity.

4. The 1990s: Rising Hostilities

Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) helped establish and strengthen Hezbollah in Lebanon, a key actor in Iran's strategy against Israel. It grew increasingly wary of Iran's nuclear program, viewing it as a direct existential threat.

5. The 2000s: Strategic and Proxy Conflicts

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) intensified hostility with statements denying the Holocaust and calling for Israel's destruction. Iran's financial and military backing for Palestinian militant groups positioned it as a direct threat to Israel's security.

6. The Syrian Civil War (2011–2020)

Iran's involvement in supporting Bashar al-Assad aligned it with Hezbollah and positioned it closer to Israel's borders. Israel launched hundreds of airstrikes targeting Iranian assets and Hezbollah in Syria, aiming to curb Iran's regional influence.

7. Abraham Accords and Iran's Isolation (2020–Present)

The Abraham Accords (2020) between Israel and several Arab states, including the UAE and Bahrain, further isolated Iran regionally. Tehran has intensified its ballistic missile and drone programs and its support for proxies like Hezbollah and the Houthis, escalating tensions.

Core Themes of the Rivalry

1. **Ideological Conflict:** Iran's theocratic regime views Israel as illegitimate, tied to its anti-Western, anti-Zionist stance.
2. **Geopolitical Competition:** Iran aims to expand its influence across the Middle East, while Israel seeks to contain Iran's regional ambitions.
3. **Proxy Warfare:** Iran uses proxies like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to challenge Israel indirectly.

Contemporary Course of Events

1. Hamas Led attacks in Southern Israel **Oct 08, 2023**
2. Israeli Strike on Iranian Consulate in Damascus resulting in the deaths of 13 individuals, including Major General Mohammad Reza Zahedi, a top IRGC commander, and his deputy. **April 1, 2024**
3. Iran launched approximately 300 missiles and drones targeting Israel. The majority were intercepted with assistance from the U.S., U.K., France, and Jordan. **April 13, 2024**
4. Assassination of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran **July 31, 2024**
5. Israel launched extensive airstrikes across Lebanon, claiming to have hit 1,600 Hezbollah targets **September 23, 2024**
6. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was killed in an Israeli airstrike **September 27, 2024**
7. Iran fired approximately 180 ballistic missiles at Israel, claiming it was in response to Israeli assassinations of top Hamas, Hezbollah, and IRGC leaders. **Oct 02, 2024**
8. The Israel Defense Forces conducted an airstrike on an underground bunker in Dahieh, Beirut, killing Hashem Safieddine **Oct 03, 2024**
9. Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza and mastermind behind the October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel, was killed by Israeli forces during a firefight in Rafah, Gaza. **October 17, 2024**
10. Israel launched a wave of missiles targeting what it described as military sites in Iran. Iranian officials reported that air defense systems intercepted several incoming missiles. **October 26, 2024**
11. Fall of the Assad Regime **December 08, 2024**

Power Assessment: Who emerged Stronger?

Israel:

1. **Military Technology Complex:** The assassinations of Hassan Nasrallah (Hezbollah), Yahya Sinwar, and Ismail Haniyeh (Hamas) underscore Israel's intelligence dominance and operational precision. Iron Dome (Intercept short range missiles), David's Sling (Medium to Long range missiles), Arrow Defence

system (Long range), Cyber warfare, Drones, Smart Bombs and missiles, Advanced surveillance technologies, Pager attacks

2. **Strategic Alliances:** I2U2, Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) also known as Arab NATO (strengthen the security relationships between the United States, Israel, and key Arab states (including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and others) in order to counter Iran), NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue (involves NATO cooperation with seven Middle Eastern countries, including Israel to counter Iran), The Abraham Accords, Central Eastern Mediterranean Cooperation (CEMEC) A trilateral cooperation between Israel, Cyprus, and Greece, primarily focused on regional stability in the Eastern Mediterranean, Israel-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Relations
3. **Domestic Challenges:** Coalition Government - Ultra orthodox Group – Overburdened Military – Clamours of Secular Groups – Public Pressure due to exhaustive pressures

Iran:

1. **Proxy Network Resilience:** Despite major leadership losses, Iran's influence through proxies such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and various Shiite militias across Iraq, Yemen, and Syria remains significant. The ideological and military infrastructure supporting these groups is deeply entrenched and capable of regeneration. **Axis of Resistance** (Iran Iraq Syria Hezbollah Hamas- **Shiite Crescent**)
2. **Nuclear Brinkmanship:** Iran's advancing nuclear program continues to be its strategic card, creating a constant threat to Israel and escalating fears of a broader conflict. Earth Quake in Northern Iran in Oct. Speculations of Nuclear test
3. **Fall of Assad and Weakening of Hezbollah:** Iran's significant investment in Syria was a pillar of its regional strategy. The loss of Assad weakens its direct land corridor to Hezbollah in Lebanon and complicates its military supply routes, though it may seek alternative strategies to retain influence. Hezbollah itself got disorganized after killing of its leadership – **1 million refugees** in Hezbollah creating disturbance for Hezbollah because majority of refugee are sunni. Iran announced delinking support to its proxies to pacify US.

Regional Implications

Core themes are still there (Ideological, Geopolitical and Proxies)

1. Increasing Regional Militarization in MENA region
2. Disruption of Regional and Global supply Chains: Houthis aggression in Bab el Mandeb
3. War of Infrastructure Corridors: IMEEC Vs BRI, China Iran \$400 Bn Strategic Partnership
4. Uncertain Role of US under Trump will make dynamics of Middle East more Complex
5. Overshadows the Israel-Palestine crisis, diverting global attention away from the longstanding Palestinian issue.

Way Forward

1. A **two-state solution** for Israel and Palestine might form the foundation of broader negotiations, where Iran could be involved as a key regional actor to broker peace
2. Creation of a **Middle Eastern Security Organization**, where Iran and Israel have defined roles in security and peacekeeping related to promoting transparency, arms control, and nuclear non-proliferation measures to build confidence and reduce military tensions.
3. Direct bilateral diplomacy between Iran and Israel, bypassing third-party intermediaries, could lead to a gradual de-escalation of tensions.
4. The promise of **sanctions relief** could serve as an incentive for both parties to engage in dialogue and reach a peaceful resolution
5. Emphasize on **multi-level mediation** involving not just state actors but also non-governmental organizations, think tanks, and religious groups that can act as intermediaries between Iran and Israel (**Track II Diplomacy**).
6. Negotiations between both countries for a **Middle East Weapons of Mass Destruction-Free Zone** (MEW MDFZ), as proposed by the UN